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BY HUME NISBET



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THE
BUSHRANGER'S
SWEETHEART.

AN AUSTRALIAN ROMANCE.

BY
HUME NISBET,

AUTHOR OF

"BAIL UP," "THE BLACK DROP," "A COLONIAL TRAMP," "THE SAVAGE
QUEEN," "THE QUEEN'S DESIRE," ETC., ETC.

THIRD EDITION.

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An Australian novel by a native of Stirling, following somewhat the lines of Rolf Boldrewood's Robbery under Arms.

EDINBURGH

COLSTON AND COMPANY

PRINTERS

+
Dedicated

TO

MY VERY OLD AND DEAR FRIEND

RICHARD VARY CAMPBELL, M.A., LL.B.,

ADVOCATE, AND

SHERIFF OF DUMFRIES AND GALLOWAY,

WHO FORMERLY GAVE ME MUCH ENCOURAGEMENT IN MY PENCIL,

AND WHO HAS LATTERLY ENJOYED MY PEN, I TRUST,

ALMOST AS MUCH, I GIVE THIS FAITHFUL PICTURE

OF CERTAIN PHASES OF AUSTRALIAN LIFE,

WITH LOVING ADMIRATION

AND RESPECT.

THE AUTHOR.

CONTENTS.



CHAP.	PAGE
I. FIRST STREAKS OF MY PECULIAR LUCK,	1
II. MY PARTING WITH LYDIA,	8
III. ON BOARD <i>THE VANBROUGH</i> ,	15
IV. SOME OF THE PASSENGERS,	23
V. STRINGY BARK GREETES THE LAND OF HIS BIRTH,	31
VI. MRS LATOUR'S COFFEE PALACE,	38
VII. A MELBOURNE NIGHT,	46
VIII. THE SCRAP OF PAPER,	53
IX. GETTING DOWN,	61
X. MR JAMES WALKER,	67
XI. THE WOMAN WHO WAS MURDERED,	76
XII. AN EVENING IN LITTLE BOURKE STREET,	84
XIII. A MIDNIGHT MISSION,	92
XIV. CAPTAIN RAINBOW TELLS HIS STORY,	101
XV. MELBOURNE FREE HYDROPATHIC ESTABLISHMENT,	109
XVI. PADDY'S MARKET,	118
XVII. ANOTHER OFFER OF MARRIAGE DECLINED,	125
XVIII. THE GENUINE ARTICLE,	133

CHAP.	PAGE
XIX. THE ORIGINAL SUNDOWNER EXPLAINS HIS SYSTEM,	141
XX. STRIKING THE FOREHAMMER,	149
XXI. OUT OF EDEN,	157
XXII. A WIFE PROVIDED, WITH A GOOD BILLET THROWN IN,	165
XXIII. <i>THE FINANCIAL DIVER</i> ,	173
XXIV. AT THE COTTAGE IN WILLIAMSTOWN,	181
XXV. THE MAJESTY OF THE PRESS,	189
XXVI. SANDY MACINTOSH GETS A COMMISSION,	198
XXVII. STRINGY BARK FALLS A VICTIM TO CUPID,	206
XXVIII. CAPTAIN RAINBOW APPEARS,	214
XXIX. RAINBOW LEAVES THE COTTAGE,	222
XXX. AT AH KUM'S,	230
XXXI. SABINA ONCE MORE,	238
XXXII. A WEEK IN ARCADIA,	246
XXXIII. THE GOLD GULLY,	253
XXXIV. FORTUNE SMILES,	260
XXXV. THE DREAM OF SCHOPENHAUER,	268
XXXVI. FOUR HUNDRED AND EIGHTY-FOUR THOUSAND POUNDS,	275
XXXVII. DOCTOR ASTRINGUS BARK, M.D.,	282
XXXVIII. GYP IN A NEW CHARACTER,	290
XXXIX. THE ATTACK ON THE STATION,	297
XL. THE LAST RIDE,	304

P R E F A C E.



TWELVE years ago the last of the bushrangers was cut short in his public career, and the ground left entirely open for less ostentatious professors of his unholy craft, as any reader may find out by turning over the pages of that interesting and most authentic *Dictionary of Dates* compiled by my friend Mr J. Henniker Heaton, M.P., who has more recently made it possible for people, even in reduced circumstances, to write to their colonial friends without finding the stamp money too much, and who will yet, I daresay, reduce the fare, until writing to Australia becomes a necessity, instead of what it was formerly, a luxury.

In this work, *The Dictionary of Dates*, you will find all about the "Kelly Gang," and how they played their pranks throughout Victoria as lately as the year 1879, so that I have fixed upon Victoria as the locality of my hero's adventures—a colony I know a considerable deal about, and where I have had some adventures, also, a little time prior to the advent of the "Kelly Gang."

I have attempted to depict the troubles of a young gentleman, who, having been deprived of his patrimony, goes out to get "colonial experience" instead,

and how fortune favoured him most unexpectedly; how he fell amongst bushrangers and other shady characters, some of whom are still to be found in such avenues as Little Bourke Street even in the present day, at least they were very much alive when I last visited that celestial quarter of the fair and flourishing city of the South—Melbourne.

The Sundowner is, I think, being fast driven away, *i.e.*, the colonials are becoming less sympathetic to the weary wanderer, and hard-hearted enough nowadays to make him work for his night's lodgings; yet I believe he may still be met with in the outlying districts. But that distinct production of Australia the Larikin is still very much to the fore, as spry, active, and wicked as he ever was, perhaps rather more so. Stringy Bark and his chums are not at all scarce, although I don't think they have been made studies of before—educated by the Free State Schools, and smartened up by the generous climate until they beat the rest of creation for impish audacity—who only require the chance to become anything, from a boarding-house tout to a Member of Parliament, in that free and glorious colony, where every man, woman, and child are as near to the highest state of smart perfection as it is possible for frail humanity to reach.

THE AUTHOR.

HOGARTH CLUB,
36 DOVER STREET, PICCADILLY, W.,
LONDON.

THE BUSHRANGER'S SWEETHEART.



CHAPTER I.

FIRST STREAKS OF MY PECULIAR LUCK.

I DON'T exactly know whether I ought to rail at Fortune, or feel grateful to her for the manner she has treated me all through life; whether Diogenes was better off in his tub than the conqueror Alexander at the head of his army, the one revelling in his poverty and filth, and the other enjoying his power and flattery, who can tell. Perhaps Alexander was more elated after a bloody victory than Diogenes felt after he had particularly disgusted some spectator with his peculiar habits; but then, like the pleasure which favourable notices impart to an author over his new book, the thrills of victory soon evaporated from the mind of the ambitious conqueror, while the somewhat unsanitary tub-sage had always his merry jest to chuckle over and repeat before some other super-refined passer-by without ever a fear of failure in the result.

Now, whether I should have been better or happier suffering indigestion, ennui, and all the other attendant evils and wearinesses of repletion during the early days of my manhood, in the fashionable clubs and other haunts where the money-victim betakes himself to, had my luck been as I was born and brought up to expect, or, as it actually chanced, loafing about the colonies in the picturesque costume of that modern disciple of Diogenes, the sundowner, with teeth and digestive faculties all sound, active, and not too much abused, I must leave the reader of my adventures to decide for himself as he reads on, for after I got over the first fever of disappointment, and had placidly settled down to my philosophical and healthy mode of living, I never could

determine for myself. I expect it is all in the getting used to the position which Providence calls upon us to fill where the satisfaction or discontent comes in.

My name originally was Lucknow Mortimer—Lucknow after the Indian city where I was born during the mutiny, my father being one of the heroes of that memorable siege, and Mortimer the old family name which he died to keep honourable, as gentlemen understand honour—afterwards, when I was forced to change my occupation of heir-presumptive to that of “sundowner” assured, I came to be known to all who cared to know me as Luck Mort for ease and shortness, as is the custom amongst colonials of my class.

My father died in harness, and, being like myself, too careless and improvident to look after the rupees or rubies which were knocking about during the mutiny, he left my mother unprovided with any means beyond her passage-money back to England. On the homeward voyage, she also followed his example, and left me to the tender care of my father's eldest brother, a wealthy but crusty old bachelor and landed proprietor in that fertile garden of England, Kent.

My uncle, Philip Mortimer, was a squire of the old school, owning two or three villages and the best half of a small market town. His rents brought him an annual income of over ten thousand pounds, of which he did not spend half, living in, and liking the pleasures of, the country better than the city, so that he was reckoned to be the wealthiest land-owner of that part of the county, and therefore was a great and important personage whom the lesser fry delighted to honour.

Like all country grandees who have not been contradicted, he was an irascible and somewhat domineering old gentleman, who liked his own way in all matters whether right or wrong, and, having had his wishes carried out all his life, could not comprehend the art of yielding a point. He laid down the law firmly, and expected all who were about him to consider it fixed beyond appeal.

He did not like the female sex, therefore had as few about him as possible, and although hospitable to his male friends and acquaintances, gave no general entertainments for the wives and daughters. He had a good cook and an

exceptional cellar, dined late and drank deeply afterwards, expecting his visitors to do likewise; was a staunch Tory to the backbone, and conservative as regards blood to the last degree; had periodical attacks of gout, swore lustily when put out, and was lavish both with his horsewhip to punish and his purse to reward; and, in fact, was a thorough-paced, blue-blooded fine old English gentleman.

My first coming in short clothes was not an agreeable advent at the Hall, but as he had no kith or kin himself, and my pedigree was without reproach, he endured the affliction, sent me out to nurse until I was old enough to come home and have private tutors, got fond of me after a style, and treated me as his representative and heir.

So I grew up to early manhood, with a liberal allowance to provide for my youthful extravagances at school and college, taught nothing which might be useful to me, unless I had natural gifts to utilise the easy education and accomplishments which go to make a gentleman out of a man. I could ride well, hunt well, fish well, fence and shoot fairly, play cards just enough to lose without blushing, and had read enough to keep up a conversation at dinner with the rector; but as the old gentleman did not consider it at all necessary that I should enter drawing-rooms or study the female sex, I knew little or nothing about them up to my majority, at least not as regards my presumed equals in society.

"When you are old enough, Luck, I'll look out for a suitable wife for you," my uncle, the Squire, used to say, and so I was quite content with my present idle and aimless existence.

It was pleasant, and just suited my easy temperament exactly, to knock about the covers with my gun, enjoy a gallop over the fields after the foxes, lie about smoking my cigars when the weather was too hot to walk with comfort, read novels on the wet days, run up to town when I felt tired of the country, and do a little harmless dissipation, sure that I had only to draw a cheque when I required it, for my uncle never grumbled, nor went into particulars as to what I spent, and I was not energetic enough to plunge either at cards or the turf; in fact, I must have had the makings of a "sundowner" in me, even in those early days.

Not knowing much about women, I regarded all alike,

as my father must have thought about my mother, as ladies, who should be honoured and treated with respect. In my college days the fast man did not interest me. When I went to theatres, I thought more about the play than the players, and being by nature shy, I did not get involved in any of the manly scrapes which might have made me acceptable in the smoke room. Indeed, you must understand from this confession that I was a bit of a softy, who had neither pride enough nor passion enough in him to be victimised either by man or woman.

My first row with my dogmatic uncle was when I asked his permission to join the army, as my father had done. I wasn't at all tired of my present life, but I thought it was my duty to the family to become a soldier, so I put it to him in that light entirely, without any enthusiasm or energy.

The result was a tornado of oaths and stampings about.

"Your father was a younger son, Luck, and it was his duty to die for his country; as my heir, you require to live for your country, so never again speak of such a preposterous folly."

I accepted my duty and my position meekly, and without remonstrance. I hadn't the slightest desire to go out and be shot by a savage enemy: the pheasants and hares were quite good enough for my temperament to face, as far as gunpowder was concerned.

On my twenty-first birthday we celebrated my "coming of age," when I was introduced to the tenants as their future master, and my health drank lavishly by all the farmers and rustics in good old home-brewed ale twenty years old. I had been just one year old on my arrival in England when the hogsheads were laid. It was all very satisfactory, and I took it, as I did most events, as a matter of course, without troubling myself greatly about it.

Of course, I made myself agreeable to my uncle's tenants, and danced on the lawn, as in duty bound, with their wives, daughters and relations whom they had brought to witness the *fête*.

The landlord of the "Blue Boar" was there, with his daughter, and a cousin from London. I danced with Kate, whom I had seen and known from my boyhood, and then took out her cousin.

Curious what a little thing may change a whole life ; that little chit of a cousin changed mine.

Grey-green eyed, with a white face, nothing to look at as regards features or figure, soft-voiced—yes, she had a low-toned voice, and a gentle, timid sort of an air. I cannot remember now what colour her hair was, or whether her features were straight or otherwise. I do know that she was thin and undersized, and that she felt like a starved sparrow as I towered above her, and took her gently in my arms, in case I should crush her tender bones ; and yet, before that country dance was over, she had snared me completely.

As I have plenty of adventures before me, I need not go into that unequal courtship. Lydia Crimp was her name, the daughter of a London tailor, without a grace to recommend her to any man, selfish, mean and ignorant, and yet she drew me after her, supplying me with the determination I had hitherto lacked, making my will hers, and the purse that my uncle supplied me with, her bank, to draw from as she liked.

Had I only plunged a little into town life, or my uncle been less dogmatic, it would have ended all right, and this wretched shadow would have gone her way, satisfied with her lot, and left me satisfied with my experience ; but my own delicacy created ambitious dreams in her little heart, and she aspired to become the future squire's lady, a fancy that I encouraged to the utmost. All day long I hung about this miserable specimen of humanity, making myself the talk of the village, until at last the news came to the ears of my uncle, and he took me to task.

"Dash it, Luck, don't play the fool in your own village, and amongst your own tenants. She's a poor thing, but if she is your taste take the jade out of the way of scandal."

"Then you consent to my marriage with Lydia, uncle ?" I asked, delighted to find him so complaisant.

"Your marriage !" cried my uncle aghast. "What the dickens do you mean, sir ?"

"You said I might take Lydia."

"Well, fool ?"

"I suppose that means marry her ?"

I will not go into the rest of that interview. My uncle

lost the little temper he possessed completely, and, what was worse, made me lose mine ; indeed, until that night I did not know I had a temper, but it came out then. We parted like two mortal foes.

I went to the miserable cause of it all, and laid the case before her, asking her to come with me and get married quietly ; but she was wise in her generation, and consulted with her uncle, the tapster, who, knowing that the estate was unentailed, and which side his bread was buttered, advised her to let me go alone, until I had settled the difficulty with his landlord.

I went up to London by myself, and for the next three weeks raised money from the Jews, spent it recklessly, writing passionate love letters to Lydia Crimp, who still stayed on at the village inn, and generally played the fool, ignoring my uncle's messages of conciliation, until at last he became implacable.

I heard through our family lawyers that he was ill, but paid no heed to that, as I thought it was only a ruse to get me to yield my point, which I resolved not to do ; I would be a man at last, and assert myself.

At the end of three weeks I received a letter from the family solicitor, which woke me up,—my uncle was dead, and I was requested formally to attend his funeral, with the after reading of the will.

Yes, that woke me up, and dispersed a great deal of Lydia Crimp from my mind. The old gentleman had been kind to me in his way, if dogmatic, and I had treated him harshly. I felt no elation at the property, which would, of course, come to me ; I only felt my own heartlessness and want of consideration.

So I went back to the Hall once more, miserable and self-reproachful. What was it to me that these broad acres would be mine ? I forgot all his shortcomings of temper, and saw only the old man who had been my father all through these twenty years.

He had died suddenly at the last, and I could not but feel that I was the direct cause of his death. I might have humoured him a little more, and by-and-by even got him to consent to my union with Lydia.

Ah well, the time of watching passed over, and the stately funeral. We saw the last of him, and then the

lawyer took up his position in the library, with myself and the old servants, who had been remembered by him. I listened to the formalities of the law patiently, a legacy to this one and the other, who were past active service, and the leaving of the rest to my care as the future master.

I felt no joy in my possessions; it was all as I had expected it to be. I was now the master, and must take up the responsibilities, and yet through it all I thought, "If I had only been more patient, I might have got my wishes and had him still."

At last the lawyer ended the reading of the will which left everything to me, and then he paused, looking very awkward, licking his dry lips with his tongue, and regarding me with a curious expression.

"Well, Mr Sampson," I said, considering it all over, and getting slowly up from my chair, "I suppose that is all?"

"Not quite," he replied, a little huskily, as I thought; "there is a codicil added to this will."

"Yes?" I answered, sitting down again calmly; "you had better read it also."

"A codicil which was added five days ago—on the day that your uncle died."

"Yes, Mr Sampson; go on."

"I should like to prepare you for that codicil," Mr Sampson replied, looking past me towards the window, and speaking very hesitatingly, at which I wondered.

"There is no necessity," I observed easily; "some after-thought on my uncle's part, probably."

"Yes—an after-thought; yet it concerns you very nearly."

"Then out with it, Mr Sampson. What are you waiting for?"

In my perfect innocence of legal matters, I had no premonition of evil. I had been so long accustomed to the thought of my expectations, that only an earthquake could have startled me.

That earthquake came a moment afterwards. The old man adjusted his spectacles, after a pitying glance at the window, and read,—

"As regards my nephew Lucknow Mortimer, I reverse all that I have formerly written, and leave him the sum of one hundred pounds only, to be paid in quarterly instal-

ments of twenty-five pounds, for one year, trusting that it will give him sufficient leisure to turn himself about and decide upon some way of earning an honest livelihood."

CHAPTER II.

MY PARTING WITH LYDIA.

THERE was a little more in that codicil, not much, veiled up in the legal phraseology which troubles an unprofessional listener to comprehend in its full meaning. Yet the words which left me a beggar were plain enough; also, I was able to grasp that the heir was a distant relative, whose name and existence I had only heard about remotely, a half cousin of my dead uncle, to whom this sudden change of fortune would take as much by surprise as it did me.

Having never experienced the want of money, for a few moments after the solicitor had ceased speaking, and while he and the old servants were regarding me with pitying glances, and a strange silence brooded over the library, I sat perfectly motionless, with a half-smile on my lips, without a sensation either of surprise or regret at my unexpected loss. Poor old man! it was just like what he would have done in his explosive state, write down the name of a man whom he abhorred in order to punish me for my contradiction. How savage he must have felt at the moment, and how he would regret it afterwards!

During these few moments of passive amusement, I was looking upon the mental picture of my uncle making that codicil without meaning it to be his final arrangements. Of course he had altered it all, and the lawyer had yet to turn over the leaf and read some more.

"Go on, Mr Sampson; you have some more to read, I suppose?" I remarked, with a smile.

"No, Mr Mortimer, I am sorry to say that this is the whole."

"What!"

I leapt to my feet, with open mouth, as the awful thought flashed on me like a streak of lightning. I was a beggar, or worse, for during the past fortnight I had borrowed to

the extent of five or six hundred pounds, besides my card I O U's at the club as yet unredeemed; cut off with a pittance of twenty-five pounds per quarter for one year only, and this load of debt upon my shoulders, debts of honour, which, if I did not clear, would leave me branded as a blackleg amongst all the fellows I knew.

"Oh!"

A red, wave-like blood rushed over my eyes, while a fury which I had never experienced before filled and thrilled my whole being with absolute hatred towards the man just laid in his grave, the old man who had brought me up so luxuriously, so uselessly, to cast me upon the world dishonoured and a vagrant.

I will not repeat the anathema which my lips uttered over that newly-buried uncle. As the servants heard it, they stopped their ears with their fingers, and ran frightened and shocked from the room. The lawyer alone stood rigid through it all, as if curses were pretty much in his ordinary line of business.

"Where are you going, Mr Mortimer?" he asked quietly, when at length I ended, at the same time placing himself between me and the door.

"To the devil, of course, to find that monster, my uncle," I replied, with a wild laugh. "Where else can a useless hound like myself go?"

"Well, Mr Mortimer, there are lots of other places where you might learn to be useful, if you are not now. America or Australia, for instance."

"With twenty-five pounds due three months after this, Mr Sampson."

"I don't mind advancing you that money at once. In fact, without any disrespect to the wishes of my late client, seeing that he did not consult me about this unfortunate codicil, I do not at all mind advancing you the hundred pounds, on condition that you leave the country with it."

His words had a soothing effect upon my weak mind, so that I sat down and prepared to listen to him, for I had known him since my childhood, and respected him as an honest man.

"I may say candidly, Mr Mortimer, that I never was so much astonished, nor felt more afflicted, in my life than I did when I opened this will and read the codicil. Honestly,

I believe that if your uncle's spirit could order me at this moment, that he would order me to tear off that codicil and destroy it; but as this is not likely to happen, we must face the inevitable, and resign ourselves to the most unjust and most unpremeditated act of foolish—nay, criminal—passion that ever mortal committed, and repented."

"Thank you, Mr Sampson, for your sympathy," I replied, stretching out my hand to him, which he took and pressed in a fatherly fashion. "I feel better now, and but for one thing could ask the dead to pardon my late hasty words."

"And what is this bar to your penitence?"

"I owe in cash and debts of honour over a thousand pounds."

"Ah! well, candidly, Lucknow, I am not sorry to hear it, for as you cannot satisfy your creditors, the Jews, and those fast club friends of yours with one hundred pounds, there is only one other course left open for you at present."

"And that is death?"

"Oh dear, no, nothing half so romantic. You must just let those debts lie over for the present, until you have made enough money to repay them, and meantime drop out of sight,—go abroad, where there are lots of chances for a tall, strong, accomplished young fellow to return with a fortune, or— Yes, you may try that first."

"Try what, Mr Sampson?"

"Wait here until the heir comes to take possession, and throw yourself upon his generosity; he may get you into some gentlemanly billet."

"No, not that, Mr Sampson; I couldn't swallow pride far enough to ask a favour from a man who takes from me what I was brought up to regard as my own. Besides, from what I have heard about him, he is a miserly and usurious old curmudgeon, whom no fellow of any pretensions to spirit would consort with; at least so I have heard my uncle say."

"Then he is old?" asked Mr Sampson.

"I don't know, but I expect so," I replied carelessly.

"Married, and has a large family, perhaps?"

"That also I am ignorant about."

"Well, Mr Mortimer, my advice to you is to stay where you are until this curmudgeon comes to take possession of his property. I shall write to him to-morrow, so doubtless

he will be here soon enough ; meanwhile, get your own property together and sent over to my place as quickly as possible, and leave the rest in my hands. If I can see my way, without lowering your pride, to make some arrangement—dignified arrangement, of course,” he added blandly, observing my impatient movement, “I will do my utmost to secure this. If it fails, then I shall take out a passage for you in the first outward-going ship, so keep your mind easy.”

In this way the family lawyer took his leave, having put me into a much more charitable frame of mind than I could have believed possible. There were yet a few days before me, during which I could enjoy good eating and drinking, and play the master, without the necessity of thinking too seriously upon my future *rôle* as an outcast.

Yes, I had still a few days left to me before the evil hour arrived, and now that the first shock was over, I was young enough and easy enough in my disposition to be able to shove back the anticipations of evil, and, besides these few golden days, I felt that I had the love of the girl, for whose sake I had lost fortune, to console me. I would see Lydia Crimp, pass the remainder of my time in her sweet company, and afterwards go out to the colonies and make a fortune there, of course.

I felt as sure of making that fortune as I felt certain of the truth and affection of Lydia, as I had also felt positive of being my uncle's heir.

I went from the library up to my bedroom to wash my hands and face before going down to the village inn, and as I looked at myself in the mirror, while brushing down my hair, I smiled grimly at the reflection before me, which was that of a young man not yet twenty-two, tall and strong enough to make a good backwoodsman, provided the inclination for exertion could be forced up—it had never been yet, but perhaps necessity might stand in as my friend in this respect—dark complexion, with rich enough colour, brown eyes with heavy lids, regular enough features, good teeth, and that delight of young manhood, a tender moustache of the same ebony tint as my abundant head-thatch.

Nature had been kind enough to me in personal gifts if my uncle had not. I was in no difficulty what to do with my hands and feet ; my clothes were cut up to date, and my wardrobe was ample enough to serve me for a consider-

able time, even if the worst came to the worst, while as for trinkets, such as watches, rings, pins, etc., they represented a considerable sum in stock. Mr Sampson was quite right, there was plenty of time for despair yet awhile.

I dressed myself carefully and walked over to the inn, which my charmer adorned with her temporary presence. When I got there, however, I could see by that fine shade which landlords can adopt so easily towards their customers, that the news of my uncle's will had travelled before me. Mine host was polite enough, certainly, served and joined me in the quart of beer which I ordered and paid, willingly, but he was not so servile as he had been in the past.

"Lydia in, Simon?"

"Yes, Mr Lucknow, but she aint well to-day; a 'ead-ache, or summat o' that sort. She's been lying down most of the afternoon."

"Ah!" I could have sworn that I had seen Lydia in the bar as I came within sight of the inn, but perhaps I had been mistaken.

"Then I suppose she will not be visible to-night?"

"No, I think not."

The landlord left me at this point to attend to some of the other customers, and not caring to stand before these curious fellows, with a friendly nod to them I passed out, making the best of my way home again, feeling just a little discomposed at my non-success. In former times I should have been asked effusively into the bar-parlour. "Ah, well, I suppose I must get used to that sort of thing."

The next day was Saturday, and again I was unsuccessful in seeing Lydia, so had to amuse myself as best I could packing up my belongings, and going amongst my favourites, the horses and dogs. From what I had heard about the heir, I had not much hopes of being treated over generously in the matter of mementoes, so I was taking my farewell of all my dumb friends about the place. My hunter—ah, there would be no more use as far as I was concerned, for him. Poor old fellow, he seemed to know this as he laid his velvet nose against mine. Jenny, my own beloved mare, which my uncle had given me last birthday; well, I had not ridden her much, so could bear to part with her without too much pain. She would always bring me something to my

slender fortune, so I gave orders to the stableman, Jim Wood, to have her sold as early as possible.

The servants knew that I was going, and showed their sympathy, as well-bred English servants who are old retainers will do, quietly. They were doubly respectful, and showed themselves eager to obey my slightest wish. Altogether, I think that this unusual consideration made me feel more depressed and miserable than even the boorish incivility of the pot-house landlord, with the unexpected silence of his niece, Lydia Crimp.

After all, when a man is hard up, it is much more bracing to be snubbed than pitied; he can always laugh at the snubbing, it is the sympathy which demoralises his pluck and makes him limp.

Bernard, my dog, a fine young Cuban bloodhound, however, was a great comfort to me; he knew nothing about my change of fortune, and I knew that it would not matter much whether he had comprehended it or not, so far as his feelings were concerned. I had bought him as a puppy, and brought him up constantly beside me, and whatever he cost me in the form of passage money, I resolved that we should be mates. A fine young fellow he was, just over his baby troubles, and growing staid and reliable, well-trained and affectionate; he could do pretty nearly everything except speak back to me. At least *he* did not disappoint my expectations.

During the afternoon one of the lads took over my packed and roped boxes to Mr Sampson's, and brought a message from the lawyer. He had heard from Mr Thomas Mortimer, the heir, informing him that he would be at the Hall to take possession on the Monday. I had, therefore, only another clear day of repose before me.

On Sunday I went to church and listened to a funeral sermon from the Rector, who preached pointedly on the virtue of resignation to Providence, while the congregation watched me closely through it all. The good man gave me his hand at the door after the service, with a fine blending of severity and condescension, which did me a world of good. His living depended upon the heir, and as I was no longer of any consequence to him, he showed it to me as plainly as only these wise shepherds can do towards their flock. I was a poor, therefore a blackened, sheep.

Lydia Crimp was at the church with her aunt and cousin, but she hurried out without looking in my direction, yet I could see her back as she walked quickly down the church-yard path. Therefore, hastily shaking off the flabby hand of the Rector, I made after that disappearing back as fast as my long legs could carry me, determined to get this business settled at once.

"Good morning, Lydia," I said quietly, as I reached her side, touching her arm; for although she must have heard my feet behind her, she had not turned round.

"Oh, my gracious, Mr Mortimer, how you startled me!" she exclaimed nervously, giving me her hand, but without meeting my eyes with hers, while her aunt and cousin went on before us, after bestowing upon me a very curt salutation.

"I trust you are better to-day, Lydia?"

"Better? Oh, yes—that is, not quite. The shock, you know."

"Yes, it was a shock, Lydia; and now that I am going away, I thought you would like to see me."

As I spoke to her, I was watching that white, plain face, and wondering what had bewitched me in it.

"You are going away, Mr Mortimer—for good?"

Her eyes were still kept resolutely fixed upon the grass at her feet, and her voice, although shaky with nervousness, was utterly lacking in the quality I had expected.

"That will depend upon you, Lydia."

"How can it depend upon me, Mr Mortimer?" She looked up to me now with a cold look in her green eyes, having braced up her courage at last, I suppose. "They tell me that you have no money, and no prospect of getting any."

"No, Lydia, not much, unless I make it myself."

"Then what can you expect?"

I did not reply, but looked at her steadfastly, while she grew crimson and then vicious, as her class will when they want a quarrel.

"You did not expect a girl like me to keep to you now that you are turned out, did you—after all your fair promises coming to nothing? There, I call you nothing less than an impostor!"

"I did not expect much Lydia," I replied gently. "I

only thought it my duty to see you before I left, and give you back your liberty if you wanted it."

"Of course I do; but I wouldn't ask your permission to break off this ridiculous engagement—a piece of impudence you expecting such a thing. And, of course, you'll be mean enough to ask back the presents you gave me; it would be like you if you did."

"No, Lydia, I don't intend to ask back any presents I gave you."

"And I wouldn't give them if you had, there. What I've got I intend to keep, all except your photograph, which I don't want. I have it with me, so take it."

She put her hand into her pocket, and drawing out the portrait, flung it insolently at my feet.

"Good-bye, Lydia Crimp," I said, holding out my hand, which she took and dropped quickly, turning away and muttering,—

"Good-bye, and a good riddance, too."

So ended my first love romance. It was about as prosaic as I was myself, I must admit; but, like the clergyman's parting, it was decidedly wholesome.

I stood and watched that thin back until it vanished round a turn of the lane, with more of amusement than sorrow in my mind. So violently had love consumed me before, so quickly it died out, without even a trace of the fire. Those parting words had blown it all away, leaving the ground clear, if a trifle dry.

After she had gone from sight, I stooped and picked up my poor photograph, and then turned my face towards the kennel, where I knew I should find a hearty welcome from my dog Bernard.

CHAPTER III.

ON BOARD *THE VANBROUGH*.

MONDAY morning came quickly enough, and brought a goodly number of letters to me from club friends, requesting immediate payment for the I O U's which I had given so freely, at the same time pretending ignorance of my uncle's will; from the money-lenders, Messrs Moses & Co.,

calling me, as Lydia had done, an impostor, and threatening immediate proceedings.

They were furious, these gentry, and their spluttering letters made me laugh while I sat with my old friend Mr Sampson at breakfast, waiting upon the coming of the heir. How quickly a man may descend from the pedestal of dignity, pride and honour! Already, seeing how useless it was to fight against my fate, I was prepared to dodge my creditors. The treatment of the Rector, followed by my dismissal from the false divinity I had set up, had made me somehow see things in a different light. And now, as I sat listening to the sage advice of my legal friend, honour, pride and dignity appeared to dwindle from colossal statues into tattered waxworks before the grim and brooding goddess Necessity.

"You will leave all these demands with me to answer and stave off for you until you are in a position to take them up and meet them, Lucknow."

"You are very good, Mr Sampson."

"Yes, I am very good, for a lawyer, because I haven't quite given up hopes of you; but we shall soon see what the first move is to be."

We were not kept long in suspense as to the heir's intentions. He had written to say what train he would come by, and so the carriage had been sent for him, while we waited on his arrival passively.

As we waited, my hound Bernard lying at my feet, and Gyp, a little black-and-tan terrier, half foxhound half English, made himself comfortable on the easy-chair. This was my late uncle's favourite dog and companion, and which had, since his death, attached himself to me whether I would or not.

At twelve o'clock the carriage returned from the station with Mr Thomas Mortimer, the future master. We went out to the hall door to receive him, and found there a hard-featured, thin man of about sixty, with a decided stoop in his shoulders, and a frosty, ill-natured expression. The icy look he threw in my direction as he descended boded badly for any chance that I had with him.

"You are Mr Sampson, I presume?" he asked the lawyer abruptly.

"Yes, Mr Mortimer."

"And this is your clerk, I suppose?"

"No, sir; this is Mr Lucknow Mortimer."

"Oh, the heir-presumptive!" he snarled, turning from me with an ugly laugh, and walking into the house, where we followed him.

"Look here, Mr Lucknow Mortimer, or whatever they call you, I expected you to have cleared out of my premises before this, and unless you have any business to transact with me, I'd advise you to make yourself scarce now, as *I* have business to talk over with my lawyer, and my time is precious."

"Thanks, Mr Mortimer, for your hint. I have no business to transact here that I know of, now that my things have been removed, excepting the removal of my horse from your stables."

"Your horse, my bold beggar; I shall have to know something more about it before you remove a single stick from this house, far less one of *my* horses from the stables. Who gave you that horse you claim?"

"My uncle gave it to me last birthday."

"Then I suppose you can show me writing to that effect, can you?"

He was beginning fair, this relation of mine. As he uttered the words in a loud, coarse voice, and fixed his icy eyes upon me, I was divided between the desire to laugh at him and the itching in my foot to kick him, old as he was. The desire to laugh won the day, so I burst out laughing, Mr Sampson sitting like a stoic through it all.

"What are you laughing at, eh?"

"Well, I was laughing at you, Mr Mortimer," I said at length. "Amongst gentlemen we do not generally produce documentary evidence to ratify a gift."

"But you are not a gentleman."

"Sir!" The kick was coming uppermost as I stepped forward, while Mr Sampson laid a restraining hand on my arm.

"Pooh, touch me and I will clap you into jail before you know where you are. Indeed, my fine fellow, it is probable that I shall do so very shortly without your assaulting me, unless you can redeem these bonds, for you are my property until you do so, as much as that chair is."

He kicked the chair in question, and produced from his

pocket three of my Jew bills, to the amount of six hundred pounds.

"Oh! so you are 'Moses & Co.,' are you?" I asked sarcastically, as I recognised the papers.

"Yes, I am 'Moses & Co.,'" he replied harshly. "Now, are you prepared to pay, or deliver up what goods you have taken from this house?"

"I vouch for Mr Lucknow, Mr Mortimer," said Mr Sampson quietly.

"Oh, you do, do you, very well," snarled the usurer. "All the same I must know what he has removed from the house."

"I will send you an inventory as soon as I can make it up," I said, as I prepared to leave this wonderful heir to my uncle's money.

"Yes, do, or it will be worse for you; and see that you leave that horse alone."

"All right, Mr Mortimer; good morning." I turned and whistled on the dog Bernard.

"Morning,—halloa! what do you mean by calling that dog; he belongs to the house, doesn't he?"

"No, Mr Mortimer, he also belongs to me."

"Can you prove it, sir?"

"No, Mr Mortimer, not by writing."

"Then leave him where he is."

I moved to go out, with another laugh, for no man could feel angry at anything such a pitiful object could say or do. He did it all so perfectly unconscious of his own absurdity; even the grave Mr Sampson had a twinkle in his eye, and as I walked out Bernard and Gyp followed me naturally.

"Send back those dogs, do you hear?" the heir shouted to me as I got to the door.

"Oh, you cannot expect me to be your servant, Mr Mortimer; but if you want Bernard and Gyp, that is their names, call them back yourself, perhaps they will obey you."

"Bernard, Gyp, come here, good dogs."

But although he used his most coaxing tones, neither of the dogs seemed to fancy the cajoler; they showed him their teeth, and treated him to low growls, after which they followed at my heels.

"I shall put in costs against you for these animals, pure-bred prize dogs, remember," he shouted after me, at which I

only laughed again, and went forth from the home of my boyhood, burdened with two faithful retainers, and without one idea as to what I was to do next.

I walked through the grounds, and when a little way from the front gate I sat down on a stile to smoke a pipe and wait for the coming of Mr Sampson. The world was before me now, certainly, to open and swallow as best I could.

It seemed awfully funny this home-coming of the heir. What a revenge my poor uncle had had, and no mistake. "Moses & Co." in possession of the property, cutting it up into building lots and selling it, felling the timber which had been his pride, clearing out the stud.

"By Jove, I am sorry he has got it, for poor uncle's sake," I murmured, as I thought over these probabilities, while Gyp, my uncle's dog, came fawning about me, and licking my hand.

After a while, I saw coming up the road the stable-boy whom I had commissioned to sell my horse. When he came up to where I sat, he stopped.

"Morning, Mr Lucknow ; I sold 'im for ye."

"You have, Jim ?"

"Yes ; got fifty on 'im, as I knew ye wanted cash prompt."

"Bully for you, Jim. Keep ten for your commission, and fork out the rest."

"No, master, I won't take commission this turn ; but I tell ye what, they say as ye're going out to Australia, and I want to go too ; let me go with ye."

"Well, Jim, I don't object, and so far as I can speculate on your new master, I don't think any of you will be kept long at the Hall."

"Right you are, sir ; I seed 'un this morning when he arrove ; ordered the porters about right and left, without giving them a tip. He's dirt mean, that's wot he is, and I'll only serve, gentlemen if I serves at all."

"But you'll easily get a place."

"I don't want a place ; I want to see foreign countries, so, if you don't object, I'll go with you."

"It must be as my mate, then," I said, "for I have no money left to play the gentleman."

"Right you are, mate or servant, it's all one to me."

So Jim Wood and I settled the question, and while we waited on Mr Sampson, discussed ways and means. He had

managed to save his passage money, and having no one to leave behind, being a workhouse waif, he had, like myself, no need to say good-bye or shed any tears.

Already I was rich beyond my deserts, having three friends to start with ; no wonder they call me Luck Mort.

By-and-by Mr Sampson came out of the gate with a flushed face ; for the first time in his easy life he had been badgered considerably.

That night Jim and I slept at the opposition village inn, and early next morning took our seats in the train bound for Liverpool. Mr Sampson gave me good advice ; asked me to write regularly to him, made light of the debt I had burdened him with, saying,—

“It’s a speculation, my boy—a pure speculation. The miser is an old man, unmarried, and you are the next-of-kin, so who knows when you may be recalled. Go out and get some colonial experience, keep me posted up as to your whereabouts, and leave the rest to me.”

He forced on me not only the hundred pounds left to me, but an extra hundred as a loan from himself.

“Keep your record as clean as possible, as I know you will, Lucknow, and all will come right in time ; never forget that your father was a soldier and a gentleman, only get away quietly meanwhile.”

Good sage advice, which I resolved to follow as far as I could. Whether I was able to do so or not, the sequel must prove.

At Liverpool we managed to secure berths on board a sailing vessel, *The Vanborough*, bound for Melbourne. Jim took steerage, and I took second class. I had not yet learnt the value of money, and thought it best to come down gently in the sliding scale. The dogs, Bernard and Gyp, I managed, by private arrangement with the captain, to take with me.

From the extensive knowledge which I have since acquired of the world in its under current, it would have been better for me to have kept the extra passage money in my purse, and gone along with Jim into the steerage, for when a man has to take a dip, it is always best to plunge boldly into the water, rather than dally at the side testing its temperature with his toes.

Indeed, I wanted to do this, and would have done so, had

it not been for my dogs. The captain could accept the tip of a second-class passenger, and wink at a little infringement of rules, whereas duty and dignity forced him to be rigid and distant towards the steerage. Jim also urged me to go second; he said he wanted to get used to me as a mate by degrees, and that he should feel more comfortable for the first month or two with a little difference between us for the sake of old times. Therefore, accustomed in the past to let others decide for me, I yielded easily to this.

Jim Wood was about the same age as myself, but looked younger, being small in size and pinched of features. In his early days of neglect, nature had not been given a chance with him, so that by the time Uncle had taken him into his service, he was past fattening up or growing. His ambition had been to qualify as a jockey, and he knew a good deal about stable-craft, and all about how to doctor and diet horses and dogs. He had the proportion of a boy of ten years, and would never look anything else than an old boy, sallow-visaged, with a cock-nose, small fishy blue eyes, high cheekbones, and stubbly hay-tinted hair; as sharp as a terrier, and wiry as a runner. He had as true and dauntless a heart within his fleshless ribs as ever mortal man could hope to own.

The life on board *The Vanborough*, from my intermediate standpoint, was not very interesting or diversified. My companions considered themselves too good to associate with those occupying the steerage, while the saloon passengers, in their turn, ignored us completely.

They had charades and singing in the saloon at nights, with games and flirtation on deck, these first-class passengers, and altogether seemed to lead a jolly sort of a life, such as I had been accustomed to do all my life up to now. In the steerage, also, they had their games and songs, and open love-making, which, if a little rough, was hearty enough; but in our class there was nothing of that sort of unity or harmony. Each passenger was so touchy and dignified by reason of the few extra pounds he had paid, that they would not unbend to a joke or laugh lest they might be considered common. I could not have credited the middle classes with so much superciliousness, suspicions and aggressiveness as those three and a half months at sea revealed to me. I was put down in no time as a very

common person indeed, and because, knowing that it was vain to seek to enter the ranks of my equals on board, I sought the company of the steerage revellers. They quickly tabooed me, and sent me into coventry, making audible remarks about me at the table as a "person" who had no sense of propriety. Finally, out of pure *ennui* and lack of amusement, I offered my services, and was appointed by the cook as his honorary assistant and pan-cleaner, which post suited me exactly, and completed my downfall in the good graces of these haughty Conservatives of the second class. Altogether, I concluded during that voyage that if ever I went another, it would either be first or third class.

Perhaps the manner of my appearance on board at the start had a little to do with the suspicions with which I was universally treated, although several other second-class passengers, whom I afterwards found out, through my friend the captain, had been defaulting bankrupts, came aboard as mysteriously as I did; but then they put on extra airs of starch and dignity once clear of the pilot, which redeemed them in the eyes of the others, whereas I, being too fresh at the business, did not think it necessary. A grave mistake that of mine not keeping up appearances, which eventually landed me on the road as a disreputable and ragged sundowner.

Jim found out that I had been followed down to Liverpool by the bailiffs, and taking matters in hand, threw them off the scent, landing me in a low, out-of-the-way public-house, where he pasted labels on my boxes with his own name on them, and got them smuggled quietly aboard that way, afterwards disguising me as an old man with a white beard and wig, and himself as a waterman. He helped to row me to the ship after she was clear of the docks, and in mid-stream, and so on to the deck at the last moment. Several other small boats were conveying passengers, also disguised in various ways, so that, beyond a broad grin or two from the sailors who helped us up, this style of coming on board did not seem to excite any commotion. Sailors, as a rule, are not friends of bailiffs or custom house officers, and thus appreciate "running the cutter."

Of course, the choppy Channel and the boisterous Bay of Biscay took it out of me; the first night out was placid and beautiful, with a fine half moon sailing overhead, and a

balmy autumn breeze filling our sails, as I lay on deck beside Jim, smoking our pipes. I then wondered how travellers could even say that the motion of a sailing vessel was anything but pleasant at the start.

Two young ladies from the steerage came over and sat beside us. Jim was rather forward with the fair sex, and had made their acquaintance during the day, and now introduced me to them. Bessie Watson, a young and buxom cook, going on to get a situation and catch a squatter, if possible; that was the maiden who attached herself to the lively and youthful-looking stableman. Elsie Kemp, a tiny, kittenish, girl who had been a Birmingham factory hand, took me under her protection; nice girls both of them, without a spark of prudery or reserve. We were familiar with each other in five minutes, and flirting outrageously for the rest of the evening.

They are decidedly unconventional, these children of nature; it was a lively flirtation between us, with a good deal of horseplay and broad chaff, and just a dash of moonlight sentiment, but nothing insinuating or doubtful in its character. I introduced them to my dogs, who were chained to kennels at the forecastle end near the ducks and hens, and Elsie won my regard by the free and fearless way she cuddled my dumb friends; there was no affectation about that caress.

When we parted for the night we were the best of friends, with no after reflection as to have said or done anything to make us uncomfortable when we met again, which is the truest test a young fellow can have when reviewing his intimacy with the other sex.

Next morning the wind had changed, and the waves were high, with the ship pitching heavily, which altered my ideas completely about the delights of sea-travelling. As I rolled like a helpless log in my berth, trying vainly to keep from inhaling the horrible aroma of hot coffee, rashers and stew which wafted in upon me from the breakfast table.

CHAPTER IV.

SOME OF THE PASSENGERS.

FOR the next three weeks we had very bad weather; lost our jib-boom in the Channel, and were battered about gener-

ally more and less as we beat about the waters without making much progress on our voyage. During this trying time I was completely *hors de combat*; ate only what was forced down my throat by little Elsie Kemp, who, not being at all sea-sick, constituted herself my nurse. She washed my dirty face and hands, and without paying the slightest attention to my protests, or the chaffing of the sailors and passengers, made me get up, as soon as she could get on deck herself, and walk with her.

How heartily ashamed I was during this time of the ridiculous spectacle I must have presented to this lively little girl, who would not permit me to yield passively to my trouble, and what a useless piece of humanity I felt as I sat down, with yellow jaws and lack-lustre eyes, and allowed her to do as she liked with me—washing me, for, unless she had done this, I could not have summoned pluck to do it for myself; sorting my collar and neck-tie, brushing my clothes, and watching over me like a fussy mother. It is wonderful how daring women can be when they make up their minds, and what helpless dolts men are, particularly healthy, strong men, when a little sickness overtakes them.

Jim was sick also, but he got better sooner than I did, and would have helped me, only that Elsie would not let him. I was her property for the present, and in spite of the reproofs she got daily from the matron, and the mocking laughter from the others, she stuck to her self-imposed task like a Roman soldier.

At length we had a fair wind, and I was once more myself, and could reward my little nurse by looking well, and taking her about. There was no real love-making between us, yet it was a triumph to Elsie to be the first girl on board provided with a young man, as Bessie Watson was; it did her good to make the other single girls envious. However, it was not long before the pairing off began with the sailors, young men and single women, and then the harassed matron and consequential doctor had a lively time of it, when the nightly locking-up time came, to find their female captives, and drive them away from their admirers.

So the months passed, with the usual incidents of sea-life, getting acquainted and calling each other familiar names. At least through the stewards we got to know the names and

business of all the saloon lot, while I made myself on very intimate terms with the steerage. It was here that I first got the name of Luck Mort, which has stuck to me since.

The lion of the saloon was a Captain Jenkins, who had left the army, and was now going out to the colonies with his friend Alexander Macintosh, both of whom I was fated to meet again, so I may as well describe them in short. Captain Jenkins was a little, dapper, baby-faced young man with yellow hair, and a very small but carefully-tended moustache. He stuttered greatly in his speech, wore spotless linen and big cuffs, and appeared to be completely under the influence of his friend. A great favourite with the ladies, married and single, Captain Jenkins was, and very good-natured, as we could all see, even from our distances.

Sandy Macintosh did not, however, impress me quite so favourably. He was a strong, bulky man of about thirty, with dark face and bloodshot grey eyes, hair and beard black, as were his dense and closely meeting eyebrows, which gave a sinister expression to his blotched face. He drank heavily at his friend's expense, and, as we heard from the condescending steward, played nightly with him or any one else in the saloon, and nearly always played winning cards. Captain Jenkins was very free with every one on board, and would often join us in the steerage or deck-house of an evening, where his stuttering stories always produced loud laughter; for, whether they were comic or otherwise, he made them sound funny by the manner in which he told them. His friend, however, never left the quarter deck, but stood sullenly on his dignity as saloon passenger.

The only man in the second cabin who needs description, although at the time I would not have picked him out as peculiar from the others, was a gentleman who had come on board as mysteriously as I had done myself, and who specially distinguished himself afterwards for his moral and stiff uprightness, so much so that more than once I began to doubt the evidence of my senses of seeing. Certainly it did seem that I had observed him step on the deck of the ship directly behind me, clad in a long overcoat, with a pair of blue spectacles, and a great black beard. I had also seemed to see this hirsute party disappear within the cabin next to mine, and only when we were clear of the land did we both open our doors and meet again face to

face, I minus my patriarchal appendages, and he clean shaven and grey. I also know positively that no black-bearded party appeared from that cabin during the voyage, which was occupied by this most upright traveller, and yet, when comparing his sanctimonious behaviour with his suspicious first appearance, I did feel inclined to doubt the evidence of my eyes.

Mr Ovinus Hardwake was an American by origin, a strict total abstainer on principle, a nonconformist by religious profession, and a speculator by calling. He had been in the colonies before, and a good deal about the Continent, as well as his own country; he was familiar with the Exchange in London, and Wall Street in New York, but whether he had flourished in his calling it was hard to say, as his appearance gave no index to his private means. Yet, considering that he travelled second class, he either had cause to study economy, was niggardly by nature, or else had private reasons of his own for not wishing his name to be announced in the colonial newspapers upon his arrival in that country—editors of colonial papers only insert the names of saloon passengers in their list of arrivals and departures.

He was a tall and lanky man of about fifty, with a leathern-tinted face, surmounted by iron-grey straight hair, worn longish, and crow-blue eyes. He shaved clean, had firm, close-set lips, square jaws and pointed nose; altogether, a typical cut about his visage which was unmistakable, even before he opened his lips and revealed with his yellow teeth his nationality by his drawling accent. He dressed as most of his countrymen do who have moral characters to support when abroad—in a long black surtout, with flapping tails, black vest cut low, and trousers of the same shade. He was also particular about his linen, showed a great deal of shirt front, and either wore a clerical white necktie or none at all, leaving his jet studs revealed.

He kept himself very quiet during the rough weather, but as the first calm Sunday was nearing, he asked permission from the captain to hold a deck service in the afternoon, which was granted.

Having nothing else to do, the most of us gathered round to hear that sermon. He gave out and conducted the hymns like one accustomed to open-air preaching, and

possessing a strong, if not very harmonious, voice, the hymns did not hang fire. His sermon was a lengthy one, and of the sensational character, and after it, he took up the temperance question, and proposed to take pledges. A good number of the steerage passengers signed their names, so that Mr Hardwake was pretty well satisfied with his afternoon's work.

After this he became a leading spirit on board, took the head of the table, and always said grace, going about the ship lecturing on religion and the evils of drink, and doing his utmost to help the doctor and the matron in their duties of looking after the morals of the passengers and seamen.

He was just a trifle too rigid in his manner to be a very sympathetic advocate, and over argumentative to be pleasant as a companion, too assertive in his own uprightness and moral rectitude, and as, like a great number of his countrymen, he contented himself with reading the notices of books rather than the books themselves, and thereby founded his opinion, his range of subjects was too superficially extensive and dogmatic for any one else to have a chance with him when he laid down the law. But for that half doubtful incident of the black beard and long overcoat at the commencement of the voyage, I should have felt uncomfortable having such a paragon of virtue, high-minded principles and world-wide knowledge berthed so close to me, and looking daggers at my bottled beer, while he ostentatiously quaffed the condensed water; but this doubt supported me wonderfully through both his disgusted looks and his significant warnings. I liked the bottled beer better than the condensed water, and so stuck to it.

He suited the second-class passengers exactly, which I did not. He kept up their dignity, and, while speaking about the equality of man, was always one of the first to complain if a steerage passenger strayed over the deck limit allowed to them as their promenade. He was an unrelenting supporter of rights and privileges, and he was a man of prompt action.

In the steerage, the company were very varied and mixed up—tradesmen and labourers with their wives and children of different nationalities, also the domestic servants under the watchful care of the matron.

Of course there were a number of varied studies in

this mixed gathering of the types of humanity, both male and female, which interested me at the time, but as, with few, exceptions, when we parted at Melbourne we never again met, I need not confuse my reader by bringing on any of these supernumeraries. Imagine them for yourselves;—the Irish labourer, with his wife and large family, going out from the land of famine to the land of plenty, and taking out with them besides themselves a numerous progeny of parasites, which they were generous enough to distribute, and which kept us all as busily employed before we reached the tropics as must have been the people of Egypt after Moses had delivered them over to their third plague. Most travellers who have been on board emigrant ships will reanimate that Hibernian family in their lively recollections with real gratitude for the daily parade on deck of beds and blankets, while the originators sat, placid and undisturbed, viewing the frantic efforts of the unused afflicted with comic yet open-eyed wonderment that the people should take all that ‘trouble’ over such thrives.

The German emigrant, who somehow found his way to the ship without understanding a word of English, yet managed to learn it fairly well in a week or two—sufficiently well to get the best of everything from the others quietly and stolidly. The Dane, who was frank and seemingly reckless, yet always landed on his feet where others would have skinned their noses. The Saxon, who grumbled at everything given to him, who could not find the word “gratitude” in his dictionary, who only chuckled hoarsely when he thought he had taken some one in; but was so jealous and narrow and dense to his own interest that he always chuckled too soon, yet—happy trait under the circumstances—never knew what he had lost, as he never appreciated what he had gained. The Welshmen, who stuck together, speaking smoothly to outsiders, but watchful and suspicious as foxes. The Cornishmen, on the look out for an affront, and ready with their fists to avenge it. The true-born Cockney, giving himself the air of a knowing pickpocket, yet guileless and happy as an infant. The Scotchman, pondering and deliberate-looking, and acting like a mean man, yet so sensitive of his country’s reputation that where the others give a copper he will give a shilling out of pure bravado, yet give it with such an air of penury

that he gets no credit in the giving. The Yorkshireman, getting his pound of flesh like a very Shylock, and giving it away lavishly after the bargain is over. All these types are to be met constantly in the steerage of any emigrant ship.

There were three young men who used to make the steerage lively of an evening—Tony Peters and his mate Billy Jones. They were both smart fellows, and good for either singing, step-dancing or tricks of legerdemain. Liverpool young men they were. Tony Peters had the lugubrious face of a music-hall comic singer, and Billy the unsophisticated freshness and round openness of a simple rustic at a country fair. Both had, however, remarkably well cared for, long-fingered and slender hands, the thumbs being nearly as long as the first finger. Tony Peters was a tailor by trade, and his friend Jones a chiropodist, which accounted for their beautifully kept hands and nails. They were both exceedingly clever, both with their feet and hands, with their hands especially.

I could hardly keep Jim Wood away from these artful dodgers. They were teaching him to dance and sing, and promised to let him up to a trick or two with his hands by-and-by.

The other was a Melbourne larikin man or boy, I never could determine which. He had the face of a withered old man, but his ways were juvenile and spry, if such a word as juvenile could with reason be applied to such a world-worn and knowing boy. He was less than Jim, and so slender that Jim looked robust beside him, but he had the assurance of fifty Jims about him. He had been at every trade under the sun, finishing up his education by taking the billet of cook and steward on board a small vessel from his native city to London, and was now returning home as steerage passenger, disgusted with the land of fogs.

These four festive youths generally took a hand at cards of a night, when not otherwise engaged, for pint bottles of beer, or, as this larikin usually termed it, "swanky," or "stringy bark."

He was first christened by his companions as "Swanky," but as most of us owned to a double-barrelled name, his own ship-registered name was adopted as the best, so that it finally settled down to "Stringy Bark," which title was the only one we or any one else had ever known him by.

Stringy Bark was the wickedest and most daring of boys, if he really was a boy, the most audacious and slangy of old men, if he was an old man. He would talk down a dozen, swear into silence the boatswain, who was one of the most talented of seafarers in this accomplishment that I had ever heard, make love like an immature Rochester to the women—married or single—reaching up on his tip-toes to chuck even the stern matron under the chin, while he would leer at her in such a way that he brought a blush of womanly shame into those cheeks, long since bleached to greyness, with their grim experiences of former batches of single females going out to the colonies. No subject or person was sacred to this premature little weazened fiend, for, having used up life, he eclipsed the cynicism of Voltaire, and could have given that philosopher points and won.

I used to watch and listen to him with a fearful fascination, thinking about the active bottle imp before he was released. The women used to scurry from him like frightened rabbits, yet glance admiringly at him from a safe distance over their shoulders as he postured before them, while he winked and blinked at them with his wrinkled eyelids, and darted at them flaming glances from his foxy eyes. I used to wonder sometimes if he was not in reality Voltaire dried up and shrivelled into half his original size, and then re-animated by some galvanic process, with all his intermediate experiences of the infernal regions added to his former theories, he was a larikin of the larikins, this tiny Stringy Bark, who haunted my thoughts, waking and sleeping.

"How old are you, Stringy Bark?" I asked him once, after a more than usual brilliant display of wickedness, blasphemy and rakishness.

"Two hundred years and more, counting by the rate you have lived, Luck Mort," he replied, blinking at me, and putting his hands into his pockets, while he stuck his mite of a face about half-way up the height of my leg.

I believed him. No one could doubt it, looking at these countless creases and wrinkles which rippled over that wonderful visage. He was the original critic and historian after all. Voltaire the immortal, born 1694, and rebound up to date, demy 48mo.

CHAPTER V.

STRINGY BARK GREETES THE LAND OF HIS BIRTH.

IN spite of this awful extra-concentrated little sample of colonial infamy, this Jonah of a Stringy Bark, we had no more than the ordinary allowance of calms and storms, and made what the captain termed an uncommonly fine passage out—eighty-four days in all, from Liverpool to Port Philip Heads.

Stringy Bark, prepared to greet his native land, was a sight for the gods to behold with satisfaction, and men to view from afar with awed respect.

Being close upon Christmas, and therefore midsummer, he had attired himself lightly and appropriately for the season. White soft-tanned boots, freshly pipeclayed, with yellow leather bars—ladies' boots they were, with very high heels, and small ones even at that.

"Present from a fancy gal of mine in the opera; found them rather tight and small for her tootsies, so passed them on to whom she knew they would fit to a T."

"A good thing Cinderella's grand ball was a little before your time, Stringy, or she'd been out of it with these kick-seys," remarked Tony Peters gravely.

"What! do you think, Tony my son, that I'd be raw enough to drop one? Not while there was *vice versa* to think about."

Stringy spoke fairly grammatical when he was not slang-ing or swearing, and he always slanged and swore correctly; that is, when he introduced adjectives or expletives they were used to give force to the sentence, and lead up to a climax. Even the most blood-curdling interjection had its true weight, and was never patched in idly. He had taken full advantage of the State schools, and had an artistic sense of rhythm. This is where he had the advantage always over the reckless and imaginative boatswain, and what made his retorts so scathing.

A pair of white flannel trousers, which might have come from the wardrobe of General Tom Thumb, gracefully peg-topped, and fitting his slender proportions like a Paris-made glove. He had discarded the vest, and wore instead a

richly hand-embroidered pale blue flannel shirt, with watch and handkerchief pockets in the breasts. Both were filled—the fob with a tiny lady's watch and slender albert chain, with locket attached of the brightest Abyssinian gold. Both Tony Peters and Billy Jones looked at these articles for a moment with indulgent but professional smiles.

"Good stuff for keeping, isn't it, mates?" observed the small one, cocking his eye at them inquiringly.

"Yes, Stringy; you'll be able to keep them in any crowd," replied his two friends quietly.

"Wiper not so safe though, eh?"

He produced and flourished gracefully his silk handkerchief, which was, like his waist-sash, of a subdued golden orange, thereby proving his artistic taste.

"Safe also; more than three-parts cotton," replied Tony, touching a corner of it lightly with his middle finger and long thumb.

"Thought so, boys, when I bought it. Nothing fugitive about this saint of the south. Wash well, wear well, look well. My friends know me on this side of the equator."

A small billycock hat, folded jauntily in the Italian style, rested upon his scanty tresses lightly; a cashmere loose jacket covered the back portion and sleeves of the blue shirt, while from the jewelled fingers swung a very small cane.

So Stringy Bark appeared on deck just as the pilot came aboard with the tow-tug outside Port Philip Heads, and took us in hand. Tony and Billy Jones were also got up in the fashionable array of a Liverpool or London bank holiday, but looked rustic beside this prince of larikins, in spite of their grandeur.

"Queenscliff, with fortifications, lads," remarked Stringy, taking the post of guide for the occasion, and pointing over the side with his cane. "We are able at a moment's warning to blow the British or Russian navy into smithereens just here with our torpedoes. Splendid lay that, I can tell you. Wish that I could touch the nob and show you how it works now. It's one of my ambitions to touch that nob, and the only thing I haven't tried yet. Must do it some time, if I die for it."

"What, you wicked little monster, would you like to blow up *The Vanbrough*?" cried the matron, who was standing near, and heard his words.

"Yes, Molly, darling, but you wouldn't hurt, you know for angels are accustomed to flying—see, ducky, eh?"

The matron's name was Mrs Mary Murdoch, certainly, but no one on board excepting Stringy would have presumed to call her Mary, far less "Molly." As he leered up at her, in his wanton fashion, her face expressed a mixture of emotion, indignation at the liberty he had taken with her name, and tickled vanity at his comparison.

"Lord, how that young lady blushes," went on the audacious Stringy, with brazen effrontery. "Who would take her for twenty-five, and an old traveller, to see her mounting the red rag like a girl of fourteen? If I wasn't so old; I'd be almost tempted to pay her a real compliment, just to see some more roses bloom."

The matron had long ago passed fifty, but could not stand out against this.

"You little wasp, I've a good mind to—"

"Kiss me, eh? Don't do it now, my dear; I'm shy before company. Wait until you meet me, as you promised the other night, in the Fitzroy Gardens, all among the statues, you know, with the moonlight above us; that's the proper time and place for kissing, you know."

"Oh, you lying villain, to say such a thing about me," cried the matron, fiery now with indignation.

"Pardon me, dearest and fairest, I forgot for the moment that I had vowed to keep that promise a secret; it was a *lapsus linguæ* on my part, only I was frightened lest you might forget your position before the girls, you know, and I'm such a fellow for propriety. Never mind, Moll, I'll keep the next time dark, you bet."

"I'll report this scandal to the Captain," shrieked the poor matron, rushing away in a fury.

"Thought I'd make the old girl blush," remarked Stringy calmly. "Fine colour, hasn't she, for a cold night. Geelong lies over there, boys, under those hills, the You Yangs. Splendid place to make a pile that was some years ago, but used up now. I did a good turn there for myself at one time, when things were brisk."

"What particular line were you in then, Stringy?" asked Tony Peters.

"The public. I started a drinking shanty outside the town, on the road to the diggings, got a hogshead of

swanky to start with on credit from the brewer, used pannikins instead of glasses, and with some quassia chips and good sea-water from the Bay, made two hogsheads from it. Splendid stuff that for making customers thirsty, I can tell you, boys; wholesome too, you bet. First-rate as a tonic quassia is, and you all know the benefit of salt water."

"Yes; and did you run that shanty long, Stringy?"

"For three months and more, and did a roaring trade besides. The diggers took to my special blend like cats take to fish. I was filling my pockets easy, and contenting my customers as well, while doctoring their constitutions, when I was forced to take up another business not half so profitable."

"How were you forced, Stringy?" again asked Tony.

"The ungrateful brewer heard that there was no swanky like mine for flavour in the township, so he sent down his chemist one night to taste it. Not knowing the chemist, and thinking him a likely customer, I put the salt and quassia in extra to give him a good stiff glass, and that did me. He blew the gaff, and I had to hop double quick from the vicinity of the happy You Yangs. However, I had my revenge, for I owed the brewer about two months' supply, and had the drawings in my pocket, so that I bore him no ill will for the bad turn he did me, seeing that he suffered the most."

"You air a smart young man," here put in Mr Ovinus Hardwake, who had been amongst the group listening to the adventures of Stringy. "For your size and age a remarkably cute young fellow, and should get on well in life if you had some one to direct your feet in the right direction. As a total abstainer I quite approve of that salt water and quassia, and reckon you saved a number of lives during the three months that you ran the devil's workshop."

"I flatter myself that I did, old Hardbake," responded Stringy promptly.

"It was morality on a reduced scale; only why did you stick at half and half?"

"The Lord knows, it was just about as thin as my customers could stand; a bucket more, and they would have rebelled," said Stringy, with a sudden grin at some passing thought.

"I don't exactly mean that. What I mean is, why did you stop at only half curing your victims; why did you not aim at total abstinence?"

"Oh, you mean ginger beer, soda, lemonade, and that wash. I've tried that business once, but never again, thank you,—expensive machinery, bottles to be paid for, bottles bursting and cutting one all to pieces, prices not worth the trouble of filling and wiring, and the credit all on the one side. No, Hardbake, it may be moral to make and sell lemonade, but it isn't profitable, nor good either for the manufacturer or the consumer."

"It has its points, young fellow," said Mr Hardwake severely.

"Yes, I admit it has its points, and so has gambling. Now, if a fellow has too much money, an aerated manufactory or a sharper friend may ease him of his root of temptation and evil, and so prevent him from going to the devil with drink and women. A newspaper is also a first-rate thing for that—ever try a newspaper, boss?"

"Yes."

"Drop much?"

"No; mine was conducted on sure and moral principles of rectitude, business rectitude, so that I did not lose. My paper was a financial paper," answered the American with dignity.

"Ah, that's not the kind of paper I mean—financial papers always do pay when properly looked after up to a point. I was on one or two myself once, and know the dodges."

"And I calculate you know the city we air approaching pretty well, also?"

"Know old Melbourne? What do you think, Hardbake, my boy? Yes; I know Melbourne outside and inside, with its suburbs chucked in. Want to see the sights?"

"Yes; it is likely that I may."

"Then I'm your man—will put you up to everything, from Fan-Tan in Little Burke Street to running the block in Collins Street. Don't you lose sight of this chicken when we land, if you are wise; for he'll take care that you're not diddled."

"I will keep you in sight, for I calculate that you have the makings of a real good editor in you; and, as I may be starting a financial paper in this country, if you have experience enough—"

"Ah, I have experience enough, you bet, and informa-

tion enough about all the leading cards here, as will make your paper a big success."

"Yes; I reckon it requires both experience, knowledge and caution to run a paper like this successfully."

"Caution! Why, I can tell you, sir, that caution is the biggest bump on my phrenological chart. The way I got out of that effervescing factory should prove that, I rather think. After I saw that no amount of energy or push would make that business pay; when, after a soda-water bottle, bursting at the wrong moment, finished up my old dad, who was helping me, and made an orphan of me. By Jove! that is the only good point about it—it is a first-class business for clearing off encumbrances. Well, seeing that I had no one else left to look after, except myself, now that the old guv'nor was wiped out, I turned it into a limited liability company, and, keeping back a few shares to myself, to blind the shareholders, cleared my feet and a little over, paid an old debt with the reserved shares, and so stood up once more as an honest man—ready for any new move in the game of life which might turn up. Was that experience and caution enough to qualify me for an editor of either a financial organ, a Christian newspaper, or a teetotal advocate, eh?"

"Yes, my lad. Do reckon that was fairly good for a start. I'll not lose sight of you."

"My card, boss, if you should happen to pass me over in the crowd."

Stringy Bark handed his card to the speculator, saying,—

"Good diggings, that, Hardbake, if you should happen to want to study economy. Latour's Coffee Palace, Little Collins Street, near Paddy's Market. First-class accommodation, and, if introduced by me, the old lady is good for any amount of tick."

"That's the sort of crib for me, Stringy," said the two friends eagerly, in one voice, Tony Peters and Billy Jones.

"Right you are; and you, Luck Mort?"

"Have they room for my dogs?" I asked the little man.

"Lots of room for man and quadruped, so long as they don't happen to be horses or asses. Shall I book you both?"

"What do you say, Jim; shall we put up at Latour's?"

"We may as well," replied Jim.

"Bully, my boys! Mother Latour will welcome me back like a long-lost son, if she isn't dead, or shifted—and that's not likely."

As I heard my fellow passenger, the moral speculator, speak about a financial paper, I no longer wondered that he should have quitted England under the rose. I had heard about their method of conducting business from some of my club friends, who were forced subscribers and supporters of similar organs in the East-end, and who cursed deeply, yet trembled visibly, each time their copy came in hot from the press; read it through eagerly, without missing a line, and either laid it down with a sigh of relief, or else got up hurriedly, with a groan of helpless bitterness, and rushed off, as fast as cab hack could take them, to be in time before the editorial office closed for the day. I knew how some of them waited as feverishly through the week for each new issue as a young poet is apt to do after he has sent his first contribution, and is hungering to see his name in print. Their eagerness was the same, only their case was reversed—their dread being lest they might see their names flourishing in type. So they lived, like galley slaves, in these fashionable clubs, waiting on the orders from their masters, the upright editors, who held them in chains through some foolish indiscretion—a missive stolen from their pockets, and involving the reputation of some one once dear to them. Yes! it is a paying business, up to a point—the straining point, as Stringy Bark had said.

As I looked over to where Mr Ovinus Hardwake stood making himself conspicuous on the deck as we neared the docks, with his harsh-featured, clean-shaven face full in the sun-glare, his tall hat on the back of his head, I thought, somehow, upon the embodiment of a plague nearing an unconscious city. They were basking in all their pet indulgences at present, in that sunlit city of the south, with the scourge coming every moment nearer. Well, I suppose plagues could not be able to settle down in a city if the drains were all right, and the sanitary conditions as they ought to be. Mr Ovinus Hardwake had come to look after and stir up the drains.

At last, we were moored up alongside of the wharf at Sandridge, where the sailing vessels generally lie, and away in the distance I could see Melbourne, with its domes, spires,

and lofty buildings, floating hazy in the forenoon heat, and the level plain between it and us—a city, the magnitude of which took me by surprise, even although I could not as yet see a quarter of it.

On the wharf stood a crowd of idlers and hotel touters, etc., waiting upon us to be made fast; a few well-dressed, who, recognising friends on board, wildly waved their handkerchiefs and hats, and shouted their welcomes, which were answered by the fortunate emigrants. Not having any one to welcome me, I turned again to watch the speculator, who, like the others, was scrutinising the idlers on the wharf.

All at once I saw him change colour, cram his hat over his eyes, and draw back hurriedly; then, after a pause of irresolution and a side glance astern, he bent his head forward and sought his cabin.

He sees some one he knows and fears, I thought, as I turned to where he had been looking; who was it? I looked over the faces before me, but could not find much of a clue there. Those who had come for friends had already recognised them, and looked excited and happy; the others were looking on, with faces which expressed only idle curiosity.

All except one woman shabbily dressed, of about thirty, inclined to stoutness, with a face flushed and angry looking, and close clenched teeth, who stood by herself, with frowning brows, regarding the second-class gangway into which Mr Hardwake had so hurriedly disappeared.

A blonde woman, with tangled yellow hair sticking out from her bashed crape bonnet, and a pair of fiery blue eyes, with an air about her that boded ill for the disturber of drains, if he was the man she was waiting for.

CHAPTER VI.

MRS LATOUR'S COFFEE PALACE.

LITTLE COLLINS STREET was at no period in its history a fashionable lodging locality, and particularly the upper end of it, which ran by the side of Paddy's Market.

Nor was "The Coffee Palace" of Mrs Latour's very palatial to look upon, either from the outside or the inside.

It was called "The Palace" by those who used it, in imitation of the other coffee taverns which were scattered throughout Melbourne, but as in the title, misspelt and painted yellow on a brown ground, "Latour Coffy Pallace," so, in size and general appearance, it was unique amongst coffee palaces as the signboard was original.

We left the dogs on board to be examined by the health officer—for they are mighty particular in the colonies about infection—and our boxes to be overhauled at the custom house, and after we had taken the train into town, drove the rest of the way in an awning-covered car, with a very independent and rough-looking driver, who whipped up an ungroomed steed, which matched his driver and unwashed car exactly. As it looked the best of the long line of dilapidated conveyances—that is, with fewer rents in its straw-stuffed cushions, we fixed upon it, and the five of us cramming in, with our guide on Tony Peters' knee, so we drove through the broad and handsomely-built Burke Street, past the Post Office, Theatre Royal, Arcade, and round by the unfinished Parliament Houses, turning down by the back of Paddy's Market, and then we were home.

Mrs Latour had not either passed from the street nor from this mortal sphere, and received Stringy Bark with a welcome but lazy smile, without rising from her seat at the parlour table. She was a lady of about thirty-five, large made, and stout, with a pasty white face and dull protruding blue eyes.

"Well, Mother Latour, there you are, as usual, feeding up," remarked our little pilot airily.

"Holy Mary! but it's the little divil himself come back," cried Mrs Latour, with an accent which was redolent of a more northern island than Lipari, but without exerting herself in the slightest degree.

"Brought you some lodgers, mother; any room?"

"Plinty for twice the quantity. Here, Fernandy"—a little weazened, sun-tanned Italian, with bright black eyes, hurried in and regarded the visitors with a humorous grin—"show the gintlemen through the Palace, and let them take their chise."

"Yes, missus! You're come back once more, Stringy?"

"Yes, Nandy, back again; and how are you all—bloom-ing, eh?"

"I am all right, Stringy," replied the Italian, who was cook and general attendant; "but missus no quite well. Latour has come back, too."

"Ah, from the diggings—been long back?"

"Not long—five months now," answered Fernandez, with a quick glance at Mrs Latour, who said quickly,—

"Longer than that, Fernandez—much longer than that. How far is it yet from Christmas, Stringy?"

"Six weeks now."

"Then Latour's been home eleven months come Christmas; these furringers can't count;" and with this, Mrs Latour turned hurriedly to finish her chop.

The Coffee Palace was a three-storied building, or rather two houses thrown into one. Originally it had been two small shops, with the rooms above; and a common fence-divided yard to the rear. Where we had entered, was used as the dining-room, with a shuttered front door, and a glass door leading into the parlour where the landlady sat. From this parlour a small open stair led up to the bedrooms, but, as these were already occupied, we had to go out by the one back door and enter the other house from the yard. Seeing two or three empty barrels and boxes lying in the yard, and no other dogs, I felt fairly satisfied as to the housing of Bernard, provided the landlord and landlady had no objections. I mentioned this matter to Stringy Bark, who replied,—

"Oh, Latour don't count for much in this place; it's the missis who looks after things, and I'll manage her for you."

The next premises into which we entered was used by Fernandez as his kitchen, that is, the back portion, the front shop being empty of all saving lumber, as the stair was arranged exactly as in the former parlour. We soon reached the upper premises and began our inspection.

The bedrooms, with the exception of one, were untenanted, and all very sparsely furnished. Jim and I decided upon the largest apartment, which had two small tressel beds, a couple of chairs, and one washstand. The floor was uncarpeted, but clean scrubbed, for Fernandez had been an old sailor and so understood the art of washing bare boards. There was plenty of room for our packages, and as the rent asked was very cheap, we quickly decided. Tony Peters and his friend fixed on another room near at hand, while

Stringy asked for his old room, which stood at the far end of the passage.

"Two ladies live in this room," observed the cook, pointing to the door next to mine ; "mother and daughter."

"Daughter young and good-looking?" asked Stringy, suddenly interested.

"Beautiful," replied Fernandez, with a smack of his lips ; and young, just fifteen."

"Ah, much too young," returned Stringy, his interest gone ; "what like's the mother?"

"Fine woman, but a little too fond of her nobbler, the daughter, that is Sabina, come to look after her."

"I hate boozers when they're women," said Stringy ; "don't give a chum a chance with the bottle."

"Oh, you are too much knowing, Stringy. No one can skin your eye," said the little old man, admiringly looking at the imp.

"Not many, I fancy. Well, gentlemen, hope you like your diggings?"

They were not exactly the kind of lodgings which I would have chosen had it been left to myself, but Jim Wood seemed to be satisfied, and I was not very particular where I put up ; and our cash being limited—for although I had nearly two hundred pounds left, that seemed a very trifling sum with which to start life in a new country, especially to one like myself, who did not know how to economise, or what first to turn to in order to make myself useful. The landlady seemed to be honest, if lymphatic, and as for Fernandez, with his humorous expression and ungrudging activity, I took to him the first moment he fixed his twinkling eyes upon me.

The rest of the afternoon we spent in going back to Sandridge and getting our boxes, releasing the dogs, and saying good-bye to those shipmates who had not already left. We found that the single girls, amongst whom were Elsie Kemp and Bessie Watson, were already at the Government depot, where they would have to remain until situations were secured for them, and only a few who had not yet passed the customs remained.

Mr Ovinus Hardwake had left the ship with all his property, and where he had gone we did not inquire.

It was supper time when we got back to the Palace, so

after placing our boxes inside our bedrooms, and a hasty wash, we both went down to join the company gathered together in the dining-room.

In former times—such is the force of habit—I should have thought it necessary to have dressed myself for dinner, but the past months at sea had done away with a good deal of fastidiousness as far as I was concerned. Yet, when I had taken my seat at one of the tables—white wood planks they were, covered with much-stained tablecovers—for the sake of two of the guests present, I almost wished that I had conformed to the usages of polite society, although, of course, that would have been ridiculous in such a locality and general company. However, I was glad that my coat and vest were black. You see, although I was getting down to the level, I had not yet qualified myself as a sun-downer.

Mrs Latour sat at the head of the table cutting up the beef into great ragged hunks, shovelling in the potatoes and vegetables with a liberal but indiscriminating hand, or turning from that task to ladle out the hash to those who wished it in preference to the round. Her charge per head was low, but beef was cheap in the colonies, and she had the reckless generosity of her country, with that fine discretion which distinguishes her class. Her pasty face was dewy with the heat of the evening, accentuated by the kerosine lamps and the steaming dishes about her. Occasionally she dropped her carving knife and fork or large gravy spoon to stoop and wipe the moisture from her face with the corner nearest to her of the dirty tablecloth, a bit of unconventionality which was apparently unnoticed by the company, to whom napkins were seemingly an unknown luxury, and pocket-handkerchiefs unnecessary affectations.

Mr or Signor Latour was present, and assisting Fernandez in bringing on the dishes from the kitchen outside, changing forks, knives and plates, and making himself otherwise useful. He was a mild, quiet, elderly Italian of the lower order, with straggling, straight, greyish beard, sunken cheeks, and hollow, melancholy eyes. During his exits and entrances he held his head down meekly, and never spoke until the others were done, after which he sidled into a spare chair, and took humbly what was left.

Tea, of course, was served out to each person at this

feast, which task was performed by a stout, large-made woman, with frouzy fair hair and blotched face. As she came round to me with my cup, I recognised the woman I had seen on the Sandridge Wharf scowling after Mr Hardwake. She had been drinking, I could see, for her face was deeply flushed, a humid light was in her glance, and she was just a little unsteady upon her legs. As she brought the cup to my next neighbour she stumbled, and let it fall with a crash, at which she stood looking at her mistress with an idiotic simper.

"Sure, didn't I tell you, Maria, that you'd make a mess of it, after being out in the sun to-day, and that ye'd be better of a lie down? Ye're never fit for work after a holiday," cried out Mrs Latour angrily.

"I'm all right, misses," replied Maria, picking herself together, and going on with her duty without any further accident.

After she had served out the tea, however, she staggered out of the back door, and was seen no more that night.

"A real good worker Maria is, and downright willing to help when she is sober; but she will go for a spree every time a ship is signalled," said Mrs Latour to the company generally, after the woman had gone.

"Have you had her long, Mrs Latour?" I asked, feeling a curious interest in Maria.

"Yes, about a fortnight," replied the landlady; "a long time to keep a servant in the colony. Three days is their limit mostly, but Maria seems as if she was inclined to stop. She's been four times out for a day at a time since she came, but to-morrow she'll be all right again. I'm lucky in getting such a steady help in the house."

I was glad to see such an easily pleased mistress. Of course I had not been long enough in the colony to know different.

We were a curious blending that night—mostly men like myself, come out to the colony to try their luck, and none of them too well clothed.

A young fellow with light brown hair and dark blue eyes sat next to me, with a scrap of paper near his plate, and a pencil beside it. He paid no heed to the company, but ate a bite and then jotted down a thought. He was a poet, I found out afterwards, who kept the soul inside his body by

acting supernumary at the Theatre Royal. He could not afford more than his bed, breakfast and supper, all the rest having to go for foolscap, and I noticed that he did not eat very much, for his mind was too greatly engrossed in his subject; but I think he was happy in his own fool's paradise, in spite of poverty and short commons; but what a fool he was to be sitting there dreaming about an ideal, and oblivious entirely of the poetic reality before him.

Tony Peters, Billy Jones and Stringy Bark were at another table, making themselves entertaining to their company, as I could hear from the uproarious laughter they raised. A London butcher, who had come out to the colonies, and got employment at a meat preserving company, was explaining to those at our table the superiority of pole-axing to pithing bullocks, and airing his disgust at the want of skill displayed by colonial butchers in the cutting up and dressing of beef for the market. He was an artist in his own line of business, and waxed pitiful over the humiliation of the poor beasts who suffered such indignity and waste.

"Sich animals, too, as they are, if only properly treated, they've no idea as to how to kill and cut up in Melbourne. Lor' love you, mates, I had a sheep under my hands to-day as made my heart soften, a beauty, if they had only given me time to do justice to it; but there, it's disgusting the brutality of them; killed and cut him up afore he was quarter bled. I almost cried over that 'ere poor sheep."

Looking on, and listening with an amused air, sat a man with a bronzed face, and dressed in a rough digger shirt. He did not speak at all, but seemed to be studying the company quietly. As I looked at him I was somehow impressed. He didn't look like a gentleman, certainly, as I had known gentlemen, at least; several times I noticed him doing feats with his knife that made me wonder, and yet he looked like a man for all that.

Up to now I had not thought about my dress, but as I looked opposite to me, I saw my next door neighbour and her daughter, and then I straightway forgot the rest of the company.

A *lady* of about thirty-eight, more than three parts intoxicated, with swollen cheeks and trembling red lips, trying to force herself to eat because her daughter was coaxing

her ; with wistful hungry-looking eyes, hungering for some thing else than the meat and drink before her, puffed out with spirits, yet holding herself in iron control for the time.

She never lifted those bloodshot eyes from the table-cover, yet I could see them wandering restlessly from side to side under the almost transparent eyelids, as I could see the hands trembling as they clutched the knife and fork.

Her dress was well made, and perfectly plain, her fair hair, shot with grey, gathered in a graceful coil (her daughter's doing up) upon her still shapely head, all orderly and decorous, as a woman's should be. The night was yet beginning, and she had been sleeping for four hours since her last debauch, with her daughter watching over her like a guardian angel.

As I glanced from her to Sabina, her daughter, my heart almost stopped beating, and I cast my eyes down again to my plate shamefaced, for our glances had met, and she must have known that I was looking at her mother.

Fifteen years of age, Fernandez the cook had said, she was. A lily as to complexion, with a cloud of red gold hanging over her shoulders, all wavy and tangled, and within that cloud a pair of eyes like sapphires with the noonday sun upon them. I know that they were blue by day, for I caught the purple flame that blue eyes emit sometimes in the lamp-light, although they looked black in their present intensity.

I glanced up again ; they were now veiled under their full lids, and I could therefore examine the features. An oval face, thin as yet, with arching brows, small *retroussé* nose and sensitive mouth. She sat calmly beside her mother, with thin lines round that mouth and a violet shadow under her eyelids. What a snowy brow that was, and what a strong set face, when it should be dimpled and laughing. She was a young girl bereft of her girlhood, and acting the unnatural rôle of guard to her mother.

After the supper was over, and while Mr Latour was still eating his, and Mrs Latour leaned back in her chair, replete and contented that the day's work was over, and she could now wipe her greasy lips with comfort on the corner of the tablecloth, and relax her wide figure. The men filled and lit their pipes, and rose to get the air outside.

Sabina and her mother also rose quietly and glided out to

their rooms, where, after a few moments, I saw them appear and go out, dressed for walking.

A lovely night it was for walking, with a full moon in the sky over the houses, and Melbourne basking under the combination of lamp and moonlight.

"I am going for a turn, Jim ; look after the dogs till I come back, I won't be long."

"Right you are, gov'ner," replied Jim obediently. Neither of us had yet forgotten that I had been once upon a time master, and he the servant.

So, with the two forms in front of me I left Mrs Latour's Coffee Palace, without knowing why I followed them.

CHAPTER VII.

A MELBOURNE NIGHT.

THE pair in front of me did not take the main streets for their walk, nor did they turn towards the gardens. The mother had come out with a definite purpose, and wished to accomplish it as speedily as possible ; the daughter, walking by her side, I noticed, did not attempt to remonstrate or draw her parent from the vicinity of temptation—the time had gone by for remonstrances with this victim. All that the daughter seemed desirous of was to secure her mother from the recognition of friends or the undue observation of strangers, so that she led her down the most disreputable side streets and into the most obscure public-houses. Speaking to no one, they both hurried on, as if time were an important object with them.

I learned afterwards that Mrs Condon was the wife of a squatter, and that Sabina was their only child ; that the mother was the victim of periodical fits of drinking, which came on regularly, and that when they were on nothing could restrain her, for there is no cure saving death for a hereditary lunatic or a dipsomaniac. For six months at a time Mrs Condon would not touch brandy ; indeed, during that time she could not endure the aroma of it. Then after that interval of peace the signs her husband and daughter knew so well began to manifest themselves, a feverish restlessness and desire to avoid all whom she knew and respected, and next

the dipsomaniac thirst awoke, which nothing could quench saving brandy. This fit lasted about six weeks, during which time she was past control. She could only be watched and guarded.

During the first ten years of Sabina's life, her broken-hearted father had kept this awful knowledge from her as well as he could by taking her mother down to Melbourne to some obscure lodging-house, where he kept her until she was right again; but a curse like this could not be kept secret for ever. Sabina had discovered it for herself, and then took the burden upon her own shoulders.

Mr. Condon was a wealthy squatter, so that these dark fits did not injure him in a monetary sense as they might have done a man in a less secure position, but those ten years of misery had broken him down physically, for he loved his afflicted wife, and was loved by her in return. At this time business compelled him to stay at home, so Sabina had been sent alone to look after her mother.

I did not know of all this on that first night, of course, neither did I know the names or reputations of the streets through which they were unconsciously leading me, or if I had, I should have trembled more for the safety of the young girl; yet somehow I had an instinctive feeling that I might be of service to her before the night was over, and so at the risk of being considered impertinent, I followed.

Through Paddy's Market they went, and across Bourke Street, turning down a dirty entry, which I afterwards knew was called Romeo Lane, and peopled by the vilest of both sexes. Mrs Condon pushed amongst the crowd into the bar of the first public-house with her daughter following her, and I looking on from the middle of the lane. I saw her ask for a glass of brandy, which she gulped down quickly, and then turned out again, without pausing for a second. I noticed that Sabina paid for the drink and picked up the change. The customers of this public-house, men and women of the lowest type, yet evidently they were accustomed to these two most unlikely visitors, for although they did not give way, and in one or two cases leered and laughed impudently at her, while I could see from the movement of their lips that they were calling after her, and could well imagine what the words were likely to be, they did not otherwise molest her, so Sabina followed her mother without shifting her eyes from

the woman she was guarding, quietly and passively, and with no rising colour in her pale cheeks.

Through Little Bourke Street, the hot-bed of infamy, that woman led her pure young daughter, missing no public-house on her way, and doing exactly as I had seen her do at the first place, drinking quickly the raw spirits as if it were a hateful medicine that she must swallow, then rushing out again like a silent and damned soul through that living and obscene crowd, with her helpless guardian angel behind her.

At length the thirsty vampire within her seemed to be getting slaked, for she began to walk slower, and with an occasional stagger, which forced her to cling to her daughter's arm who began to lead her in the direction of Little Collins Street.

But she was not nearly satisfied yet, I could see, from the reluctant way that she allowed herself to be led past an occasional open house ; still, she was getting towards it as well as intoxication, for she staggered slowly, and appeared to be no longer possessed with such a set purpose.

We had traversed the whole of the Chinese quarters, and were returning on the opposite side to that she had used coming down, when once more she drew her daughter into a drink-house about half-filled with drinkers, and instead of going as formerly, straight up to the bar, she sank down helplessly on a seat beside some ruffianly-looking men, with a table before them, on which were placed their glasses. When they saw Sabina with her, they made room with an exaggerated phase of politeness. As I noticed this, I also entered and took my place a little distance from them, where I could see and hear without being seen myself. As the potboy came round, I gave my order and heard her mumble out hers.

"Have a drink with me, ma'am?" said one of the men turning towards her, while keeping his evil glance fixed on the face of Sabina.

Mrs Condon looked at him stupidly for a moment without answering, and as the potman set down her order at the same time before her, Sabina, while paying for it, answered for her.

"No, thank you, sir, my mother has just been served."

"As you like, my dear, only she's welcome, and so are you. What will *you* take, for I see you are not served?"

As he spoke, the man left his companions, and went over to the other side of the girl, where he sat down as close to her as he could.

"Fred's on the mash to-night," I heard one of the others say, with a coarse laugh, in which the rest joined without seemingly being heard by Sabina, who looked steadily in front of her.

"You have not answered me, dear; what will you take?"

"Nothing, thank you, sir."

"It's a lovely night, but hot, ma'am," said the man, leaning against Sabina, and addressing Mrs Condon, who, however, did not answer him—possibly she was past hearing or comprehending an outside voice—while the girl edged herself nearer her mother and away from him. "Mighty high some people are, ain't they," the man observed loudly, straightening himself, and ordering a nobbler for himself.

I was furious with the fellow's insolence, and felt decidedly like knocking him down, but as nothing had been as yet done to justify my interference, I waited.

After a couple of gulps at her glass, Mrs Condon laid it down empty, and said thickly to her daughter,—

"Another, Sabina."

"No more here, mother."

"Yes, one more, the last, and then we'll go straight home."

Sabina remonstrated no longer, but gave the order to the barman, who was standing near, who very soon placed the fresh glass before the victim, and waited for his payment.

I saw Sabina put her hand into her pocket, which was on the side next to the man, and then draw out her hand without her purse, while her face suddenly became crimson.

"Oh, sir, I have lost my purse, and cannot pay for that brandy; please take it back."

But Mrs Condon had already made this an impossibility by drinking the half of it.

I saw the ruffian's game at once, but I was not quick enough to forestall him, for in an instant he placed a shilling into the waiter's hand, who went off with it contented.

"Don't trouble yourself, my dear, about a drink; now, won't you have one with me."

Once more he placed himself beside her, with an air of proprietorship which almost maddened me, for the sensitive girl could no longer repulse him as she had done before.

"It's a thirsty night, you know, my dear ; you had better try a glass of port wine."

"No, thank you, sir, you are too kind, but I am not at all thirsty."

"Well, I am ; here Tommy, fetch me another brandy, and a fresh tot for the old lady while you are at it."

"No, thank you, sir, my mother has had enough ; come, mother, let us go."

But although she tried to rise, her mother did not move, and when another glass was placed before her, took it mechanically in her almost helpless hand, and carried it to her lips.

"Ha, ha ! you see mother has some sense, if you have not," shouted the man boisterously.

I saw the tears start to those lovely eyes, while her hands closed together convulsively, as she sat helplessly before the brute who, I was convinced, had just robbed her, and then I hesitated no longer.

"Good-evening, Miss Condon," I said quietly, as I rose and placed myself in front of her, "may I be allowed to see you and your mother home ?"

I saw her dash her tears away and look up at me with a sudden light of relief in her eyes, then flush crimson with shame.

"See here, young fellow, I'll see to that, if you please, with my friends."

"Is this man an acquaintance of yours, Miss Condon ?" I asked calmly.

"No, sir ; but he has been good enough to pay something for me ; but—but I would rather go with you."

"That's all right ; permit me to refund what you have paid, sir," I said, putting my hand into my pocket.

"Damn you, sir, who are you insulting ? Here, Jack and Bill, who is this new chum ?"

"Come quick, or there will be a disturbance," I said hurriedly to Sabina, at the same time lifting up her mother and putting her on her feet.

"Oh, no, my fine fellow, you don't insult a man and bolt with his sweetheart that style," shouted the blackguard,

getting up and aiming a blow at me as I stood with my arm round the helpless drunkard.

His hand did not reach my face, however, for I had learnt boxing at a first-rate school, so that he found himself lying half-stunned on the floor instead, by the time I had reached the door with Sabina and her mother.

Fortunately we were close to Swanston Street, which is a comparatively open thoroughfare, for, as we reached the open air, Mrs Condon gave way completely in the legs, and would have fallen senseless had I not put both arms round her and lifted her bodily up.

"Run, Sabina," I shouted, using her name unconsciously in my excitement, "get into the open street and call the first cab; I'll follow with your mother."

Sabina was not slow to take my advice; so, without waiting on the next charge of my antagonist and his friends, who, I knew, would be after me in double quick speed, I hastened behind the flying girl with my unconscious load, getting out of that infamous locality in good time to find both a policeman and a cab at the corner, before whose presence our pursuers slunk back again into the darkness of Little Bourke Street.

Fernandez let us in by the shop door next his kitchen, as he had been accustomed to do of a night when the poor girl brought back her mother. He took the matter quite coolly, as if it were an ordinary incident in colonial life for a woman to be carried in helplessly intoxicated. Indeed, as we passed through this lumber-stored room, I saw on a small tressel bed the recumbent form of the servant-woman Maria, who had thrown herself down without undressing, and was now making the night melodious with her nasal trumpeting.

Sabina opened their room door, and allowed me to place her mother on the bed, then, gently thanking me, she bade me good-night, and locked herself in with her mother, without permitting me to gather from her words or face the shame and hopeless agitation from which she was then suffering.

So terminated my first night's adventure in Melbourne and introduction to Sabina Condon. As the reader will doubtless think, and as I that night concluded, I had not got into the most select of lodging-houses, yet, on the whole,

it seemed to be the fair start off for an adventurous life. It was like the mosquitoes, all so novel to me, that, with my chivalrous emotions excited by this beautiful girl and her sorrows, which she endured so silently and pluckily, it would have taken a great deal of discomfort to make me shift now.

Jim Wood was waiting for me when I got back. He had looked after the dogs, and, on the advice of the landlord, had taken them upstairs to our bedroom, where they were at present locked in for the night. This was a greater indulgence than I had expected, which pleased me greatly, to have my dogs always beside me, as they had been used to at home.

It was not very late yet, and as the night was very hot, we started out for a stroll through the city before going to bed, and having no one to follow now, I resolved to take it easy and enjoy myself a little.

We soon found that there was only one street to promenade after nine o'clock at night, and that was Bourke Street, but that was lively enough and gay enough to satisfy even the most jaded. Drinking-bars, resplendent in glass, gilt-work and light, with splendid looking and extravagantly costumed ladies sailing about like peacocks.

Jim and I went into several of these glittering temples of Bacchus, and had a look round. I could see that the poor fellow, who had never been in London, was fairly dazzled, and felt that at last he was beholding life with a vengeance.

At one of these places, while we stood drinking our iced brandy and soda at the marble counter, I heard the sound of music from within, and on inquiring of a waiter if there was a concert going on, he showed us into the hall, and, once here, even I shared in Jim's astonishment.

It was a good-sized room, set completely round with mirrors, which made it look almost endless—that is, all except the stage at one end, where the comic singers were performing. Scattered about were crimson velvet-covered couches, with small, marble topped tables in front of them, while the waitresses were dressed as if for an Eastern burlesque, in bright coloured Turkish costumes of gossamer and silk. Two minutes before we had been drinking in an English fashion at an English-looking bar, now we

were suddenly transported into a scene from the Arabian Nights.

"By gosh, this beats cock-fighting!" said Jim, looking about him all agape.

"I thought you coons would find your way to this hall of delight," shouted a well-known voice; and looking in the direction from where it came, I saw the unmistakable figure of Stringy Bark seated amongst some of our other shipmates on the couches. "Come over this way, Luck, and be initiated properly," the small hero shouted out shrilly.

"Showing old Hardbake the sights, with two other shipmates of ours, Luck," observed Stringy to us as we sat down near him, while he waved his hand in the direction of the other near sofas, and then I saw the pious speculator, with Captain Jenkins and his friend Macintosh, the theatres not being yet out, the place was as yet comparatively free of visitors.

"Hallo, Mr Hardwake, getting colonial experience?" I asked, turning towards that gentleman.

"Yes, sir, I am getting material for my future paper, I reckon. If you do not know our friends, let me introduce you at once. Captain Jenkins, Mr Luck Mort, Mr Luck Mort, Mr Macintosh." We bowed to each other. "The others you know already, Mr Peters and Mr Jones."

"Wh-a-t say you to—to a bo-o-tt-tt-tle of ch-ch-ch-am, eh?" stuttered the little captain at this point; a proposal which, being greeted with unanimous assent by all excepting Mr Hardwake, we prepared to make a night of it.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SCRAP OF PAPER.

THAT night at the Oriental Café was only one of many other nights which I spent in the pleasant company of my new friends, with Stringy Bark as our guide, philosopher and mentor.

Evenings at the theatre, winding up for an hour or so at the Café, and afterwards at the Fan-Tan dens of Little

Bourke Street, or some other free club, where cards formed the principal amusement.

A pleasant enough life while it lasted, and, considering the means at my disposal, it lasted much longer than it might have done had I been warm-blooded enough to be reckless; but this I was not, for I was moderate in my drinking, and only played for amusement, as I had been used to do in the past, thereby getting anything but a good name from one of our company,—to wit, Mr Sandy Macintosh.

As I have before stated, I was not favourably impressed with this man when I viewed him from the distance on board *The Vanborough*, and on a nearer acquaintance he did not improve. He was an underbred and coarse ruffian of the worst type, who had passed his life hitherto in self-indulgence, and only required a little developing to qualify himself for any crime which a cowardly bully might commit under force of circumstances. All through our intimacy he never forgot that he had come out first-class, and treated the rest of us as social inferiors in consequence; yet, having no other company to bounce over, he stuck to us like a burr.

Captain Jenkins was a different sort altogether,—a gentleman by birth, although an arrant fool, and complaisant to a fault. He never gave himself airs, but was quite content to pay the piper as long as his money lasted, and be patronised by this leech who had attached himself to him. Poor old Jenkins, he ran through his cash about the same time as I did, and was about as able to cope with the difficulties of getting bread afterwards.

These two shipmates for the present put up at a fashionable lodging-house, spent their days loafing about, and their evenings amongst the ballet-girls and barmaids, where we generally used to drop across each other, after which we finished the night at the card table.

I soon discovered that Mr Macintosh had not much money to lose, and that Jenkins was his banker. They had been at school together, which accounted for the lop-sided friendship. Macintosh's people being in the hotel line, and prosperous, had attempted to educate their cub like a gentleman, and in his youth had foolishly kept him too lavishly supplied with pocket money. Now this sort of folly does not do very

much evil if the boy indulged has the instincts of a gentleman, but if he is by nature vicious, and a cad to boot, it is pretty sure to ruin him ; true-hearted gentlemen as a rule will never overstep the lines of folly, but your degenerate cad, putting on the veneer, will turn out, ten chances to one, an unspeakable blackguard if once indulged.

Macintosh, brought up to his father's lucrative business, might have gone on and turned out no worse than most inn-keepers' sons ; but being thrown amongst his superiors from an early age, and kept flush with money, he gave way to his unbridled desires, under the impression that this was the rôle of a gentleman until he had passed the age when kicking might have benefited him.

He had been expelled from the school for disgraceful conduct, and forced to leave his home for the same reason, and as his father had regarded this "gentleman-making" as an experiment, when he found that it had failed, and his money was lost as well as his son's credit, he promptly turned his failure adrift, with just enough money to carry him sixteen thousand miles out of the reach of home scandal, only praying that he might hear no more of this disgrace incarnate.

This was the character of the individual who now sponged upon his generous schoolmate, and superciliously lorded it over all who came near him—at least all who permitted him to do so.

It took a few weeks to bring me down to the necessity of pawning my valuables and clothes, and during that interval Jim Wood did not leave me. He was not in the least afraid about himself, for he was a handy man, and could have got a billet easily any day ; but he felt it to be his duty to look after me and my rapidly diminishing cash as far as possible, and he wanted to see me get into something respectable first before he left me. Good Jim Wood, what an anxiety I was to him during those weeks of aimlessness, and how he worried me to keep me up to the sticking point.

Every morning he brought in the *Argus* and *Age*, having spent hours first looking down the advertisements and marking what he thought suitable for me—gentlemanly billets, all those he marked—then rousing me up, he would hurry me through my dressing and breakfast, and after that we would set forth upon our day of searching.

What could I do,—count, write well, correspond in three or four languages. Yes, I could do all these after a style, but I had no experience or idea of commercial values. My penmanship was not clerkly enough, and I did not know a single person of consequence in Australia, so that my recommendations from Mr Sampson were of no use to me.

I was, unlike Stringy Bark, too truthful and modest about my own qualifications, and therefore prejudiced at the first interview those who were inclined to give me a trial.

"Ah, a broken-down swell—never earned a penny in your life. No, young man, we've too many of your kind already in the colonies. Try stone-breaking, it's your only chance."

So we spent the first hours of each day during those weeks getting a first-rate appetite with our exercise, if nothing else, and returning home fagged out, Jim very depressed, and myself quite cheerful and satisfied with the general verdict as to my incapacity and unfitness for anything more aspiring than stone-breaking.

"Don't be downhearted, Jim, old chap," I used to say. "We're getting along first-rate. When my money is all done, I'll try what they all recommend, but we've lots of time yet."

After supper, I did what I had done on the first night—followed Sabina and her poor mother through the public-houses, until the victim was surfeited, and then I helped her upstairs. At the first Sabina was overcome with shame, and tried to evade me; but in some things I am very obstinate, particularly useless and imprudent resolutions, and so I would not be shaken off, and as my dogs went with me, the poor thing at last let me have my own way, and even grew grateful to me for doing what gave me the keenest pleasure of the day—that of watching over her safety, and being with her for a few hours each evening.

Of course these nightly peregrinations made us more familiar with each other, and I think it did her some good to have some one to speak to and confide in. I know that it kept me from plunging and making a fool of myself afterwards, and gave me a motive for living through those weary and useless day journeys with Jim Wood.

Bernard and Gyp, I was glad to see, took kindly to

this desolate young guardian ; in fact, before many days had passed, I made over my bloodhound to her altogether, and asked her as a favour to take it home with her next time she went—a gift which brought us together more than anything else, and satisfied me entirely, for my burden was now, I felt, provided with a good home, whatever his master might be in the future.

I did not tell her that I was looking out for a situation, and, from my lavish wardrobe and free use of money, I suppose she naturally thought I was independent of work ; and at this time I regarded her merely as a child, and spoke to her as I might have done to a little sister, who was playing a very noble and thankless part, and whom it was my duty to protect ; and I suppose she came to regard me in the same way.

But with the servant woman Maria, I was at no loss to penetrate how she regarded me, for from the second day when she had recovered from her outing, she unequivocally showed me that she had taken a decided fancy to me.

She used to wink at me when handing round the dishes at table, and waylay me at every chance for a chat when off duty ; and as she slept in the outer shop, where the late lodgers of Fernandez's end entered at night, she spared the old cook the trouble of opening the door, and then generally contrived to detain me by some excuse or other for a few minutes behind the others, telling me in very plain language that she had honoured me with her preference, and giving me stray snatches of her confidence, as these women will.

I usually evaded her hints with a laughing jest, or, by keeping Jim present, got out of her reach without offending her ; but this open exposure of her feelings were generally made the subject of much sport amongst the other lodgers, which, however, I did not care a jot for. She was a married woman, she told me, and had been left to starve by her husband.

"However," she would say exultantly, "I've got my eye on the beast at last, and, although I don't want him, I'll take jolly good care that he does not let me starve or go thirsty any more. I'm just punishing him properly for his cruelty, and can always stand my hand for the man I fancy, you bet."

And she was free enough with her money to any one who liked to take advantage of it. Sometimes, when her day's work was over, she would go out for a night's amusement, and I used to see her at some of the public-houses frequented by Mrs Condon, "standing her hand" liberally to all who happened to be in the bar, and therefore being made much of by the thirsty loafers whom she treated. Stringy Bark, also, with Tony Peters and Billy Jones, occasionally were indebted to her for a shilling or two for their night's amusement, which I don't think they ever paid back.

Sabina, in her letters home, had mentioned my services to her father, and I was much gratified to receive a very kind note from him enclosed in one of hers, thanking me warmly for what he considered my goodness, and inviting me to pay a visit to him at his station if ever I was that direction, a pleasure that I promised Sabina I would certainly avail myself of—some day.

Our two shipmates, Bessie Watson and Elsie Kemp, had found situations a little way up the country, and wrote occasionally to Jim and I, addressing them to the post-office, where every one mostly had their letters addressed who were not in fixed quarters. They told us that the groom was leaving shortly, and hoped Jim would apply for the post. This Jim did, and got it at once, so that he was also provided for, with a month of holidays before him to look after me—no easy task, as poor Jim found.

One forenoon, the English mail having come in, I had gone to the post-office with Sabina; she was expecting her usual weekly money order from her father, and I a letter from my old friend Mr Sampson.

I left Sabina at the box C making inquiries, and went round to the M's for mine, which I received, tore open and hurriedly scanned over as the others were doing round me.

Matters were going on at the Hall as I had expected they would do with the usurious and miserly heir. Old servants discharged, and expenses cut down; he was living with only a housekeeper, and her husband as gardener; the stables were cleared out and locked up, and the estate becoming a wilderness. Fortunately, added the lawyer, he could not cut down the timber, as that had been specially mentioned in the will. After I had grasped the full meaning of my letter, I made my way round to where I had left

Sabina. She was still standing there, but with a most troubled face.

"What is the matter?" I asked, as I reached her side.

"The clerk says that there are no letters for me, and yet I got this telegram to-day, saying that it had been sent yesterday, as my father always does."

"Oh, the letter may be delayed," I replied; "you will get it right to-morrow."

"But this is a more than usually particular one, and father is very exact in these matters. He knows mother is getting better," this with a fiery flush, "and he is sending extra money to take us home."

"Perhaps the clerk has not heard your name right, or been hurried in his search; let me inquire."

I turned, and putting my head to the aperture, spelt out the name 'Condon' to a young fellow who was standing inside.

"Will you kindly look again, as the young lady is positive about this letter?" I asked politely, and the clerk took out all the letters from the C division, and going over them deliberately, said,—

"No letter of that name here."

"You may be positive that he has missed the post," I said to Sabina, "and that you will get it to-morrow."

As I spoke, a very tiny scrap of paper came fluttering from the window I had just left, and rested on my boot; some one opening an inside door had sent in the wind, and driven the scrap out.

Without thinking, I stooped to remove the scrap from my boot, when one half word caught my eye and made me look at it more carefully, for the caligraphy was peculiar, and seemed familiar to me.

It was a very small morsel of a letter, which had been written on both sides and torn up very small; on the portion torn up I saw the 'gi—' and on the other a portion of a word 'qui—', not much, certainly, yet the g and the q were made alike and peculiar.

"Come this way, Sabina," I said, taking her out of ear-shot of the window. "Do you know that writing?"

"That is my father's, I am positive."

"We shall soon know," I answered, and at once went with her to the inquiry office, where I asked to see the postmaster.

Fortunately there was no great delay, so that we very quickly had an audience with the head of the department, to whom we showed the telegram and scrap of paper, and told him our suspicions. Fortunately, also, the postmaster was an energetic and shrewd man, so that the moment he grasped the situation he acted promptly.

A touch of the electric button at his side, and two detectives entered, received their orders, and went out again. Five minutes afterwards the wretched young clerk was ushered in, handcuffed—and whom I now recognised as a pretty constant visitor at the Oriental Café—while one of the detectives carried a basket with all the sweepings from department C inside.

The wretched young man waited sullenly while the piecing together of the letter went on, and I could not but admire the dexterity of the experts engaged in picking out the particular scraps from the mass of torn bits, and the putting of them in their relative places between two sheets of glass.

At last it was complete, and Sabina was able to read her father's purloined letter, and knew that he had sent her a postal order to the amount she required.

Then the stupid young thief caved in, and produced from his pocket-book the postal order, as yet unsigned. He had been waiting for lunch time, most likely, to get it signed by some confederate outside, before paying it over to himself, and with careless thoughtlessness had torn up the letter and flung all except that fatal scrap into the waste basket.

After we had cleared up this affair, Sabina drew out the money, and while the thief was marched off to Carlton Jail, we were ordered to hold ourselves in readiness as witnesses against him at the trial, so we went home again.

I was sorry to know that this young fellow, with whom I had often spoken and played, should have lost his liberty and character, for he was likely to get a long sentence, as this had not been the first case of stolen postal orders, and vexed to think that Sabina had so nearly been the victim of his dishonesty; but through it all a little satisfaction ran—she would not be able to go away as soon as she had intended from Latour's Coffee Palace.

CHAPTER IX.

GETTING DOWN.

LODGERS were always coming to and leaving Mrs Latour's hospitable house. A good deal of the business was done in letting beds by the night, so that Maria had much to occupy herself with in the sorting of rooms—not that she was very particular about fresh linen, but still they required to be changed more often for casual boarders than for the regular lodgers.

About a month after I had taken up my abode here, she lost three of her regulars, and got in their place two fresh ones. Tony Peters and Billy Jones had, alas, not been quite smart enough with their fingers to escape the notice of the Melbourne detectives, and so had been taken away by force and safely lodged, free of expense, along with the dishonest post-office clerk, in Carlton stronghold. I did not know that these two accomplished new chums were pickpockets, or at the time I should not have associated with them, but Jim Wood had long had his suspicions, and, in consequence, had watched them too closely to give them much chance for any house practice. I was both astonished and grieved when I learnt their profession, for they were both very light-hearted fellows, and the best of company; even Mrs Latour heaved a mighty sigh, and trusted that they would get off lightly, and soon return.

Stringy Bark also changed his quarters for more pretentious ones in Fitzroy. Mr Ovinius Hardwake had taken offices in Collins Street for his new paper, *The Financial Diver and Undercurrent Searcher*, and he had kept his promise to the sharp little larrikin, and gave him the post of sub-editor, so that things were beginning to look up for Stringy. He felt inclined to study dignity and look down on old associations, yet he did not quite withdraw the light of his countenance from Little Collins Street, for he often dropped in, and, besides, I met him at the usual haunts on most of the nights with the exception of press night, when his editorial duties chained him to the office.

The additions to our lodgers which we received were my boon companions, Captain Jenkins and his shadow, Mr Macintosh. They were nearing the bottom of their ex-

chequer, and thought it best to economise in the matter of lodgings. It was that able tout, Stringy, who recommended to them the Coffee Palace as a cheap place, where the much-needed credit was to be had.

Their adventures during the latter portion of the month, as told by the ex-captain, were rather interesting to me, now rapidly approaching the same goal. I now tell it a little more briefly than the narrator made it, through his stuttering defect, although not nearly so amusing, for, while he told them to us, I joined the other listeners in roars of laughter, although, after I had time to reflect on it, I thought some of the incidents were just a trifle too shady for an ex-officer and gentleman to speak about, even if tempted by necessity to indulge in ; but, then, army men are sometimes not quite so squeamish in their ideas of honour as I might have been, brought up in the country as I was ; besides, as yet, my hour of temptation had not come to me.

It appeared that Jenkins had been very unfortunate at cards, and, after three weeks at his lodgings, found that he could not pay the high rent much longer ; then Stringy had come to the rescue, having, with his usual sharpness, wormed out the state of their finances ; indeed, the tiny one had done more for these friends than fixing lodgings for them, for he brought his reasoning faculties to bear upon the point, and showed them conclusively that it would be the very acme of stupidity in them to settle for the rent coming due, when, by a little management, they could get clear away, and be so much more the gainers.

Mr Macintosh fell in quite naturally with this economical idea, and, together with the originator, in a little while persuaded the weak-minded captain to let them manage the affair for him.

"I—I— di-d-i-d no-no-not like the id-id-idea much, you kn-kn-know," observed the captain apologetically, "but Sa-Sa-Sandy sa-sa-said it was be-be-best un-un-under the ci-ci-circumstances, so I le-le-let him have it his own way."

Under Stringy's directions, they fixed on Sunday evening, during the hours of service, as the quietest time for their secret removal ; most of the lodgers had gone out, and the street was nearly deserted.

Before this, they had made all their arrangements, and

packed up their traps into the smallest compass, so, when the hour came, Stringy and Macintosh took up their posts under the bedroom window, which the captain opened quietly, and, with a rope, let down the goods to the helpers below.

The street was deserted, or seemed so, but, as it chanced at the particular time, the landlord who owned the premises was very proud about his property, and had a habit, which neither of the others at the time knew, of spending his leisure moments inside a little dark doorway on the opposite side of the street, when, for hours, he would stand proudly admiring his own possessions. This was the pleasant occupation with which he was engaged, unseen by those most interested, at the moment when they were preparing to clear out.

It was a very dark night, so that the landlord could not see very distinctly what was going on. He did not think much about two figures waiting under the windows of his house, nor trouble himself greatly about the opening of the window above, but when he saw what appeared to be bundles lowered, all his instincts as a landlord woke up—that is, after he got over his first astonishment, which, being a slow man at grasping ideas, took him some little time—long enough for the captain to get out his last portmanteau; then the watchman left his shelter, and, darting across, shouting thieves, tried to lay hold of the burglars.

The captain did not wait to see what followed after that cry of alarm, but, seizing up his hat and cane, he bolted down the stairs and out of the front door, when, seeing the landlord rushing down the street after Stringy, he went the other way, and shortly overtook his friend, who was labouring along, as fast as he could stagger, with his portion of the swag.

Joining forces, the two friends managed to get up to a car-stand without being stopped, and were very soon located in the Coffee Palace, where they sat down to wait for the coming of the adventurous and hunted Stringy Bark.

It was fully two hours before he appeared, completely done up with the long and stern chase, yet triumphant, and with his cargo intact. I give the rest in Stringy's own words, after he had sufficiently recovered himself to be able to speak.

"Narrow squeak that was boys, but I dodged him you see—never could have held my head up again if he had got as much as a pocket-handkerchief from me once I was on the job ; but who would have thought the old duffer such a ninny as to stand watching his own house on such a night, and all for the fun of looking at blank stones, or that he would take so long to wake up to our move after he had spotted us? As a landlord, I reckon he ought to be sold and salted for being such a slow old knacker.

"When I heard him shout thieves, I thought it was the peeler, and knew it was time to walk, so lifting up what I could grab quickest, I left Macintosh to pick up the rest, while I made off past the front door, so as to let him see me and get him to follow me, otherwise I felt sure that you'd have no chance with him. My dodge took, and he followed me, then I knew that you were safe, and I reckoned it would take a pretty sharp runner to catch up to me, handicapped although I was. By Christopher, but that old man could run, though, when he once warmed up to it. I took him through all the close streets I knew, and away from our present crib, and, without drawing breath, led him completely round Melbourne, until at last he had to cave in ; then I came on here. I've been going at the rate of six miles an hour for the past two hours, with a donkey load on my back, without losing an article—how is that for perseverance in a good cause, eh?"

The little sub-editor looked round for approval, which his audience were not tardy to give him ; he had clearly earned his commission.

"When I take a job in hand, I carry it through, you bet ; only two or three times during that race I wished that I could have dropped a few pounds from my weight. It will take me a week to get the tugs of these bags out of my arms, and you must excuse me if I had to drag them a little at times, since I've brought you the contents without damage."

Mrs Latour welcomed her new lodgers, and did not seem to think any the worse of them for coming to her as they had done. Landladies as a rule have not much sympathy with the losses of their rivals, so long as they are likely to reap the benefit of the transaction themselves.

Two or three days after this, however, Captain Jenkins

received a painful proof that honesty is, after all, the best policy.

One evening he was walking down Bourke Street with Stringy Bark and myself, when all at once that lively journalist saw an old friend on the other side of the street, and darted from us with a hurried cry of, "Follow me quick, boys."

While we were still standing, wondering why we should follow him at such a rate, the captain felt a heavy hand laid on his shoulder, and looking round, saw with consternation his old landlord facing him, with a very irate expression on his purple visage.

"So I've got you at last, my fine swell bilker, have I?" shouted the landlord, shaking his late lodger savagely, and looking about him for a policeman.

It was the first time that the grasp of outraged justice had been laid on poor Jenkins, and I saw, from his expression, that his action had come home to him with shameful force; for, although a plucky chap, he was completely cowed, and unable to gasp out a word of defence. Therefore, having nothing to dread, I took the case in hand as mediator.

"What do you mean by clutching a gentleman in this fashion, sir? Let him go, or I'll give you in charge for assault."

"Then let him, if he is a gentleman, pay me what he owes me," roared the landlord, glaring at me.

"Come this way and have a drink, and we'll discuss the matter quietly," I answered, for a small crowd began to collect, while from the distance I could see Stringy standing, with a most disgusted expression upon his puckered features.

It seems to have a magical sound, this invitation to a free drink, all the world over, for as I uttered it I saw a more genial look ripple over the face of the landlord, while he allowed me to lead him—still, however, clutching his prisoner—into one of the bars, where, in a vacant corner, with our refreshments placed before us, we opened negotiations.

"Well, captain," observed the landlord, after a nod to us and a quaff at his glass, "I did think as you was more of a gentleman nor to do this scrubby trick to a poor man."

"I—I am v-ver-very much as-as-ashamed, and in-in-intended to pay you,—on my hon-hon-honour I did."

"Yes," I said, when I heard the story, "my friend was a little short at the time, but he will pay you now. How much is it?"

"Five pound for him, and five his friend owes me."

I looked at the captain, and he pulled out his purse. Two sovereigns and some silver was all he had; however, I had enough money with me, so soon settled that claim, and sent the landlord away friendly.

"I did expect you to do the right thing, captain, for you was a great favourite in the house, but hadn't much hope over your mate. He's a downright downy card, I tell you, and the sooner you shuffle him off your hands the better."

I felt pleased to get the captain out of this hole, and didn't regret it afterwards, for it drew us closer together. He had never been happy in his mind over that bit of smartness, and was elated at being able to hold up his head again. Stringy Bark, however, did not look upon it in so favourable a light, neither did Mr Macintosh, when they heard about it.

"All my hard labour chucked into the gutter," remarked Stringy vengefully. "Some men don't deserve to be helped along in life."

"Damned waste!" growled Macintosh; "you might as well have put him off with a promise, and saved the clink."

However, the captain didn't think this, and neither did I, so we both bore their reproaches meekly.

A short time after this I changed my last sovereign, and, after this, Jim Wood and Stringy were deputed to raise cash on our stock. Our useless trinkets and superfluous suits went first, and I was happy that we were able to live on the proceeds of these until Sabina and her mother left us. I don't think I should have liked her to have seen me without my watch.

The post-office clerk was tried, and sentenced to two years' imprisonment, as he had not been convicted of forgery; Tony Peters and Billy Jones got off with six months each; and then, last of all, Jim Wood went up the country to his situation the day after Sabina and I said good-bye to each other. He pledged my watch, and all the clothes that I could at the time spare, before he left me—leaving me with a fair sum in hand, and a pocket-book well crammed with pledge-tickets. If something didn't turn up soon, I promised to come up to him, and try for a billet in the country.

The captain and I had, by this time, given up all our gay and festive haunts, and were now trying to economise our rapidly diminishing means ; but Mr Macintosh still spent his time about the bars, when he could borrow a few shillings from us ; allowed us to settle for him with Mrs Latour, and went growling about in a discontented fashion, and spending all that he could borrow upon himself. As I have said, this underbred cad was never the most welcome of companions, even when flush with card winnings ; but now that he became reduced to the borrowing of such small sums as half-crowns, he was nearly unbearable. What with aggravating us into repudiating him almost with his coarse overbearing, and then whining like a poltroon for us not to throw him over in a strange land, penniless. It was out of pity for his destitution which made us tolerate his presence so long, or burden ourselves with him—for I shared now with the captain in his board expenses. Yet no sooner did we pardon some boorish or unmanly trick, than he would become as insolent as before.

He stole and drank Mr Latour's wines, putting the empty bottles into the other lodgers' boxes, where they were discovered by Maria or Mrs Latour when clearing up ; fortunately she was able to suspect who the real pilferer was, although she dare not betray him. We found out, also, that he had sank to the level of borrowing money from those confiding barmaids with whom, in his flush hours, he had flirted with, and that he was in the habit of haunting the vestibules of theatres, on the chance of seeing former card friends, and getting linked on to them ; not above taking petty articles from our portmanteaus when carelessly left open, and pledging them without asking our permission, or giving us any information about the matter ; in fact, he was very rapidly fulfilling his destiny, without waiting for poverty to push him down to that lower depth.

CHAPTER X.

MR JAMES WALKER.

THE captain and I were heartily tired, as well ashamed, of this disreputable encumbrance Sandy Macintosh, and yet

we had not the courage to shake ourselves free of him, and no hint on our part was strong enough to penetrate his thick hide, and make him take himself off, therefore we were forced to let him stay on, with his weekly bill for board, lodgings and washing, entered along with ours, without either a protest or a word of thanks from him in return. He took the obligation ungraciously, and, as a matter of course ; cursing at us for our meanness in not supplying him with more pocket-money, or whining to us like a cur when he had enraged us past endurance, and we proposed kicking him out. He was there, we felt with disgust, to see the last of us, and that, while we had a rag or a copper left to steal, beg or borrow, we knew that we should never get rid of him.

Three times I had fought with and thrashed him soundly for extra dirty tricks, but all to no purpose ; he bullied me into striking, took his thrashings with contemptible whinings for forgiveness, but stuck to us like a burr on a sheep's back.

Sabina was the occasion of his first thrashing. He had managed, somehow, to ingratiate himself into speaking terms with her, and to borrow some money from her, and then, seeing how seemingly unprotected she was, like the beast he was, showed his gratitude by boasting openly to the other lodgers his intentions towards her.

It was Stringy who told me of this open boast of his, and how he had betted with him that he would be able to prove his influence before she left, so that, when I took him aside and warned him, being a burly enough ruffian, and considering himself stronger as well as older than I was, he laughed scoffingly at my interference, and told me contemptuously to mind my own business, if I did not wish him to give me a lesson.

The lesson which he proposed to give me took place during the next five minutes in the backyard amongst the barrels and cases. I am afraid, during the three minutes that he was able to rise up to me, he damaged one or two of these articles in his falls, for he was a heavily-built man ; but in the end I got his promise that he would no longer molest, or even speak to or about Sabina, and I took good care that he kept that promise afterwards.

The second occasion was when I caught him trying to frighten Mrs Latour into giving him some money ; once

more I led him out to the backyard by the nose, and broke in a stave of two of the barrels with his thick head.

The third occasion, I used my walking stick all to shreds upon his body, and saved my fists for something more worthy. I saw him kick the terrier "Gyp" when he thought no one was looking, and made him howl for mercy on his knees before I left off. By this time he had made himself so unpopular that even Stringy Bark refused to lower himself by speaking to him, for the larikin had a certain sense of dignity in his small body, and the cur Sandy had outraged it; after that, there was only another step to take, and the graceless mongrel took it, and for a time left us at liberty.

For some time back the lodgers had laid complaints to the landlady about things going astray, which made it very uncomfortable for the rest of us, for a petty thief in a house is a most uncomfortable addition until he is discovered. Mr Latour fixed his suspicions on the reckless servant-woman Maria, and used to spend most of his spare time which he had left from that mental calculation as to the number of months since his return, watching her movements in a silent and secretive manner, but without much success; Maria was fond of drink, but sour wine was not all to her taste, so that, while his bottles disappeared, with other little articles, he never was successful in convicting Maria.

At last he missed the axe with which he was in the habit of daily cutting firewood, and this last wrong broke up his patience and silence. It is wonderful how some men fix their affection on trifles. The losing of the wine had not appeared to trouble him greatly, but from constant handling of that axe he had become attached to it, and would not be comforted for the loss of it. He became, from a silent and humble man, voluble and energetic.

"I must find my axe, though I lose all the rest of my money," he cried to every one, as he hunted for it through the house.

"Send for a detective," said one of the lodgers, "and you'll soon find it."

Mr Latour at once acted on this advice, and, in company with the detective, went through all the brokers' shops in Melbourne. At last they discovered the axe, with the description of the seller, whom Mr Latour at once recognised as Sandy Macintosh,

The culprit was out when they appeared at Little Collins Street, and while they were waiting for him, I saw him as I was standing at the front door, coming through the market.

Although I did not like him, I thought it friendly to give him a hint to be off while he had time, getting for my pains anything but thanks, which served me right.

With a swagger the bully went inside to where Mrs Latour sat, trembling with fear, trying her hardest to soften her husband's wrath, and move the representative of law to mercy for the unworthy criminal. Thinking himself safe with the poor woman on his side, he began to bluster and swear in a very mighty way, but at sight of the handcuffs which the detective slowly produced from his pocket, his courage suddenly evaporated, and, dropping on his knees, he sprawled abjectly before the company, making such a pitiful show of himself, with his threats towards the trembling landlady, mixed with blubberings for mercy, that at last the detective rose in disgust, and, telling him to try and look something like a man, locked his wrists together, and dragged him from our sight. "The most miserable cur that he had ever clapped the darbies on," were the last words we heard from the captor about the whinings of his prisoner.

The magistrates gave him three months' hard labour, and when we read that sentence in the newspapers, we all breathed more freely, feeling as if we had ourselves been released from prison; indeed, Mrs Latour was so happy that she at once gave orders for a free oyster supper to all her lodgers, and after it, went to bed happy, in the full confidence of her lord and master, who, in the joy of his recovered treasure, quite agreed that Mrs Latour had been right as to the date of his arrival, and that neither he nor his countryman Fernandez knew a bit of counting past pounds, shillings and pence; so once more perfect harmony reigned in that Coffee Palace.

I think I have already mentioned one boarder who was with us from the night of my arrival, in whom I was peculiarly interested—the quiet, observant man in the digging costume, with the bronzed face.

James Walker he called himself, a man of about thirty-two; in height, five feet nine inches, with slight but firmly knit figure, small hands, feet and ears. He was square-shouldered and broad-chested, with narrow flanks, and when

he walked had just a little of that wideness about the knees which men much accustomed to riding cannot avoid. He was not what one might call striking or handsome at first sight, but there was a decidedly manly look about him and subdued firmness which could not be mistaken. In spite of his mildness and sedateness, he was not the kind of fellow to take liberties with.

He had a straight nose and well-cut lips, which, although almost covered with his close-trimmed moustache, showed pleasantly when he smiled; his eyes were of that tender greyness which look so sympathetic and warmly out at one, from the long dark eyelashes which generally shade this description of eyes, and prevent the sparkle from being seen except in moments of excitement, when the lids spring back suddenly, and a blaze of steely hardness flashes out of them. I had never seen him excited, but I could imagine those dove-grey eyes with the blue flame lighting them up.

He had a close-cut and pointed beard, brown, like his moustache, and wavy hair, which he wore rather long for Piccadilly or Bond Street.

He went a good deal out to the theatres, and used to sit in the gallery on these occasions, and was a first-rate dramatic critic. During the day he stuck a great deal to his bedroom, lying on his back and reading books or the newspapers. He bought all the colonial papers, and studied them closely.

He was a widower, he told me, and was then waiting on the coming of his son, who was leaving the school he was at and going on to another.

One evening the son came by himself, and after spending a day with his father, went back again to his school all alone. Dicky Walker, the little chap called himself, not more than nine years of age, yet I think he was the most self-possessed and oldest-fashioned boy, with the exception of Stringy Bark, that I had ever seen. He was small and thin, but, unlike that volatile larikin Stringy, he was grave almost to sternness, and measured every word before he uttered it, as if on his trial by jury.

He bore not the slightest resemblance to his father, although any one could see that he was passionately fond of him, as well as profoundly respectful; yellow skinned and almond-shaped eyes of that intense filmy blue black, which are seldom seen in any other than a Chinaman, with closely-

cut jet black hair. Indeed Stringy Bark had some reason on his side for asking the boy, when he first saw him,—

"I say, Dicky, was your mother a Chinawoman?"

"No," said the boy steadily; "English."

"Then she must have kept a china shop, that's all."

The boy looked at the audacious Stringy gravely for a few moments, and then asked,—

"What was your mother?"

"A woman, of course, sonny. What did you think she was, eh?"

"I thought she might have been a monkey," replied the boy softly; at which we all laughed heartily, seeing how completely the hitherto matchless one had been at last matched.

But that preternaturally grave boy never smiled or showed any sign that he had scored a point, and his father merely smoked on quietly, with a humorous twinkle in his eyes. He took Dicky that night to the theatre, and as the captain and myself were economising, we also chose the gallery, where we sat near them. James Walker seemed intensely interested in the play, or at least in certain parts of it, where one of the minor characters appeared, for he never took his eyes from the performer—a young actress, who frequently glanced up at his part of the house. I found her name on the playbill, Jessie Carew, and as I watched the pair of them, I began to understand why he went so often to the drama, and also called to mind that I had seen a young lady about her build and figure visit him sometimes during the day.

Dicky hardly looked at the stage, and appeared to take very small interest in the performance, but he watched keenly, with his filmy black eyes, the audience, boxes, stalls, pit and gallery. His eyes wandered and rested on every face for an instant, going over them by rotation carefully, and beginning again after he had completed his survey.

Suddenly, when the piece was about half over, I saw him lay his tiny hand gently on his father's arm, and whisper something into his ear, and then, without a pause, turn and glide out of the gallery. About five minutes after he had left, the second act was over, and Mr James Walker rose, as many of the others were doing, and walked leisurely out after his son.

Jenkins and I also went out for a drink and a cigarette, and then we went back again to see the end of the play; but neither father nor son returned.

The young actress came on again and glanced up as before, but only once; after that she directed her glances towards the stalls for the rest of the performance.

The next morning I again met Dicky and his father at breakfast, and very soon afterwards the little chap left for school. We had all a subject to talk about at breakfast, for the papers were full of the escape of two bushrangers who had managed to break out of Carlton Jail, where they had been lying waiting their sentence for the last five weeks, having been captured a week before our landing. Each of us had some theory to offer as to their mode of escape, with the exception of the digger and his son, who both sat and listened quietly, without making any remark.

Mrs Latour made a great deal of this little boy, and kissed him in a motherly way before he left, but his parting with his father was very undemonstrative; indeed, the miner did not take the trouble to rise, or move the pipe from his mouth as Dicky went out—merely an affectionate look passed from the black to the grey eyes, and then the boy walked lightly away.

"That'll be a smart boy some day," said the landlady, looking after him with an indulgent glance in her dull eyes.

"He is that already, ma'am; very smart and reliable," answered Mr Walker gently.

"Wish I had him for an office boy," said Stringy, who, by force of old habit, had looked in on his way to town.

"Do you?" asked the miner.

"Yes, I do; by Jove, I'd make a man of that boy in no time—teach him a wrinkle or two, you bet."

"Well, I'll see when he comes back. Perhaps I'll send him to you instead of another school. I'll hear what he says about it."

"When do you expect him back?"

"In another week's time. They break up for Christmas then, you know."

"Then I'll speak meantime to old Hardbake, and try to get him on."

"That paper of yours is beginning to make a bit of excitement in the financial world," observed the miner.

"Ah, you bet on that. We're hot, and already have scored some points and bagged a few dimes; but hold on a bit, we're only beginning with our muckrake."

"You keep back a good deal of information, I see."

"Yes; when we're paid for the sacrifice, we make it."

"And I suppose you have good methods for acquiring information about these big bugs?"

"Yes, my man, that's my department—private detective for the press in the cause of moral purity. There's not many domestic skeletons that I can't nose out in this city."

Mr James Walker looked at Stringy with admiring interest.

"You need smart people in that office, and my son might do worse for himself than learning such a paying business."

"It is paying. Look here, before we go to press this week, I expect to bag as my commission twenty pounds sterling."

"Do you say so? Then I suppose you lay yourself out to find how much cash your clients can afford before you run them to earth?"

"You are about right there. No good of us to waste our time black-leading a hard-up duffer or a credit man. We deal strictly on the ready-cash system. For instance, to-morrow night we go to press; well, about four o'clock a few special proof-sheets will be sent round to the offices of those most interested—some items, you know, which may or may not be published in our *Diver*, according as we are treated—two different accounts, one complimentary, and the other truthful, but just a trifle severe and personal."

"Yes," returned Mr Walker quietly.

"Then we wait quietly on the result, the boss in his office and myself outside, ready to take orders to the printer at ten o'clock. Before that hour, I expect three of our leading ready-money fish will flounder along with gaping gills, and a thousand pounds each in their pockets."

"Cheques, of course?" queried Mr Walker indifferently.

"Cheques be burnt! We don't deal in cheques. Why, if we presented them at the bank it would look like bare-faced bribery. In gold, my boy, which we have already ascertained that they have in their offices. Each of these nobs will come in cabs, with their bags bulging out, then I usher them, one at a time, politely into the sanctum, and

shut the door ; no witnesses over that transaction, for only the editor and sub are in the building."

"I see ; you keep clear of that transaction."

"I am supposed to, but I keep an eye on them for all that, so as to keep the head honourable, else I might miss my com."

"And after they have shelled out, what happens?"

"I show the respectable victims out as I showed them in, and then go back for the 'proofs' to be inserted."

"I expect you print on the premises?"

"No ; we haven't room. Our printing works are next block. The old man generally stays for early 'proof,' which I fetch him, and then goes home to his virtuous couch, while I manage the rest."

"A good business. I'd like to see your printing place."

"Then meet me to-morrow night at half-past ten, corner of Swanston Street, and I'll show you over the shop. I shall have just time to hand in the slips to the printer after I leave the boss, and after that a good hour to spare before I take back last proof to him."

"Right you are ; I'll come."

Mr James Walker went back to his bedroom, and read till supper time, after which he went as usual to the theatre, and home again.

Next day he did the same, leaving the theatre in good time to keep his appointment with Stringy. Jessie Carew wasn't on that night, as it was a new piece ; and as I was interested in the play, and cared nothing for printing mysteries, I had a drink with him between the acts, before he left, about half-past nine ; he was going to have a smoke to kill time until half-past ten.

He met Stringy at the time and place appointed, and was greatly interested in the show, and then came straight home to bed.

On the following morning Stringy Bark dashed in upon us while at breakfast, in a great state of excitement.

"By the Lord, what do you think has happened?" he cried loudly to the miner.

"I don't know ! Something wrong with the paper?"

"I'd just say there was. I've lost my commission of twenty pounds and the editor a cool three thousand."

"How was that; didn't the clients pay up after all?" inquired Mr Walker calmly.

"Yes, like men; but while you and I were watching the printers, I'm hanged if some one didn't get into the office and rob the governor of every blessed sovereign. When I left you at the foot of the stairs and went up, I found the old block lying senseless—chloroformed—and the place cleared out."

"How did it happen?" we inquired in a body.

"More than any one can tell. Hardbake was sitting writing at his desk, when suddenly he felt himself seized from behind, and a handkerchief stuffed in his face; then he lost his senses, and only came too after I had found him. He reckons it was one of these infernal dupes, if not all three, who came back and dosed him."

"Not at all unlikely," answered the miner quietly. "That's one of your risks, I expect."

"Yes; but let them look out for next week's issue. Hardbake's like a black snake at coupling season," answered Stringy Bark, "and so am I over that vanished commission."

CHAPTER XI.

THE WOMAN WHO WAS MURDERED.

At last Jenkins and myself came to the end of our tether; that is, a few days before Christmas we reckoned up our joint stock—for we were now sharing the one room and joint purse—we discovered that we had pledged everything with the exception of an extra suit each, two spare shirts, two socks, six collars and a few washable neckties, while as to funds in hand we had between us exactly three pounds eight shillings and sixpence, with a few odd coppers. We sat down after this examination on our individual tressel beds, and regarded each other a little dolefully.

Something definite must be done without much further delay, and altogether different to what we had hitherto been trying to do without success, for it had some time before this been borne in upon even our inexperienced minds that there

wasn't the ghost of a chance of us getting into any respectable situations. We must lay aside false ideas of dignity, and try the untrained and muscular branches of earning our bread.

"Do you think, captain, that you could break stones?" I asked at last.

"Y-y-yes, I th-th-think I could manage th-th-that."

"They tell me that we can always get a job on the roads at stonebreaking, and after a little practice might earn as much as twenty-five shillings a week."

"T-th-that'll suit, l-le-let's try it," stuttered Jenkins, and forthwith we went to a second-hand shop and laid out some of our money in two pairs of moleskin trousers, coloured shirts and strong boots, with two dilapidated soft felt hats, so we were accoutred for the position in life that we were meant to occupy.

We got the job easily enough. Two mounds of rock were placed before us, and two stonebreaker's hammers, and for three days we went at it manfully enough for twelve hours each day, taking the skin off our hands, and returning each night hopefully, but with backs like to break. At the end of that time we went to the overseer and received payment for what we had done. I found that I had earned one shilling and twopence, while my companion had made tenpence halfpenny. With this magnificent wage we thought that we would go home and enjoy our Christmas holidays, well earned as far as labour was concerned, however inadequate may have appeared the reward.

"I do-do-don't think we sh-sh-shall make our p-p-pile at stonebreaking, L-L-Luck," remarked the little officer dolefully, as we were tramping along the dusty road towards our lodgings.

"No, Jenkins, we must think of some other move after Christmas."

That night, however, a chance was thrown in our way quite unexpectedly. At supper I was placed beside a middle-aged woman who had come that afternoon, as she said, from Auckland to meet her daughter, who was coming from Sydney to play Columbine at the pantomime. She herself expected to get in as one of the dressers.

"A good number of extra supernumeraries are employed during pantomime, are they not?" I asked, as I was sud-

denly impressed with the idea that this might do for the present better than stonebreaking.

"Sure to be," replied the mother of Columbine; "and if you care for such a post, a gentlemanly fellow like you will have no difficulty in getting it."

I looked over towards the youthful poet, and interrupted his composing by asking if he thought there was an opening for two.

"Yes; I heard the captain of the supers to-day saying that they wanted twenty extra men. If you like to come with me on to-night, I'll introduce you," he replied.

The middle-aged woman spoke a great deal about her daughter, as fond mothers will do—what a real good girl she was, and how clever at her profession as a burlesque actress; and, finding me a good listener, she gave me a considerable amount of her confidence. She expected the boat in on the morrow, and would be off to meet it after breakfast. Would I come with her and be introduced, she felt certain that I should get on well with her daughter Therese.

She had knocked a good deal about the wardrobes of theatres in all parts of the colonies, this genial dame, and had a roving eye and a rubicund face, and, as I also noticed, a very unsophisticated black wig not too well fitted, which would always get shifting about, so that the parting never appeared in the centre, which gave to the upper portion of her face rather a lop-sided and rakish appearance; but she was very pleasant company for all that, although a little faddish on that absent daughter.

After supper, Jenkins and I accompanied the callow poet to the theatre, and passed for the first time that unappeasable Cerberus, the grim stage door-keeper. Then, plunging downstairs into the lower regions devoted to the supers, were duly put through our facings by the chief, a very slender but important personage, who might have passed for a world-soured brother of Stringy Bark, and by him enrolled in his staff, and ordered to appear without fail in the morning for rehearsal. Our wages were to be fifteen shillings per week, with costumes, etc., found. Now, this being a decided advance on stonebreaking wages, we both returned to Mrs Latour's in a state of exuberant spirits. There was a chance for decayed gentlemen being permitted to exist in the free and independent colonies after all.

Maria, the servant, had been out that evening, and evidently had some good news also, for she admitted me in an extra effusive way, and informed me that she had received some money that night, and was therefore going on the "burst" next day; and if I'd only join her in that outing, we should have a gay time of it, and nothing, as far as I was concerned, to pay for it.

I had a considerable difficulty in getting away from this amorous kitchen woman that night, and excusing myself on the plea of my new engagement from joining her the next day. Indeed, I am afraid that Maria had indulged over freely that evening, for she turned sulky at my refusal to be happy in her company, and after using some forcible, but rather unladylike, expressions towards me, flung herself in a decided bad temper on to her tressel bed, bidding me go and be "doomed everlasting" for a young fool that didn't know what was good for him.

Next morning Maria went out before breakfast time, still in a vicious state of mind towards me; and after breakfast the mother of Columbine left to meet her daughter, with her rebellious wig still awry, handing to the landlady a little bundle which she had brought, and saying she would call for it in a few days, if anything prevented her returning that night.

Jenkins and I attended rehearsal that day, and were bullied and drilled by that little chief, till I fancy the last shred of our caste pride and dignity fell from us, so that, when we were afterwards sworn at by the stage manager, and treated as base varlets by the utility actors, and all but kicked out by the overbearing stage door-keeper, we began to feel that fifteen shillings was, after all, not too much in return for the manhood which we had lost. However, if we had to endure our troubles and tribulations meekly within the histrionic shadow of the wings, we could always laugh at these ridiculous sham lords and kings when we got outside.

The following day Latour's Coffee Palace became an object of great interest to the police. A woman had been found strangled in the swamps the night previous, and before the public had been apprised of the tragedy through the medium of the press, we knew all about it.

Hardly had we finished breakfast when our old friend

the detective, with two others, appeared before us with grave faces.

"We understand that you had a woman staying in this house the night before last, who left yesterday morning?"

"The woman who left the bundle—yes," gasped Mrs Latour, terrified by the ominous gravity of Detective Smith.

"Oh, she left a bundle behind her, did she?"

"Yes, sir, and said she would come back for it."

"Has she come yet for it?"

"No; is there anything wrong about her?"

"Yes; she has been found murdered this morning in the Emerald Hill swamps, and recognised as having come from this house. Tell me all you know about her."

Mrs Latour was now almost frightened out of her senses by this awful news, and related all that she knew about the woman, which was little enough—how she had stopped only one night, and went off to meet her daughter, whom she expected from Sydney.

The detective took elaborate notes of all she said, and at last asked Mrs Latour to come with him and identify the body, a request which nearly sent her into hysterics. However, as there was no getting out of it, she sent for some brandy, and went upstairs to dress herself, and bring down the bundle, which the detective took under one arm, and our horrified landlady on the other, and so led her off, leaving us all in a state of great excitement.

In about half an hour he brought her home again in such a state that she had to go immediately to bed, while Latour ran for the nearest doctor.

She had recognised the body as that of the woman who had gone out to meet her daughter—an awful sight, which she would never forget to her dying day, as she afterwards told us, when, at supper-time, she had recovered herself sufficiently to come down and relate in detail all the horrors she had witnessed.

The evening papers gave us all the particulars known as yet of the crime. Up to going to press the police had not succeeded in finding Therese. One man had given evidence as to hearing two or three muffled shrieks as he was passing the spot the night before, but as they had stopped before he came up, and the night being very dark, he had not ventured from the planks, thinking it only a drunken row, a thing

quite common at that part, so, after listening for a few moments and hearing no more cries, he had gone on.

The medical examination proved that she had been dead over eight hours, and that her death was due to strangulation.

One clue the police had, which promised to be an important one. In her hand was clenched a tuft of fiery red hair, evidently taken from a man's beard, and cut off short to the hand, when the murderer had seen that he could not remove it from her grasp.

The next day we heard that they had arrested a soldier, who bore a very bad name. He had been previously convicted of a similar attempt upon a woman near the same place, and, what seemed more conclusive, had been in the habit of wearing a beard, fiery red, which he had, the day of his arrest, shaved completely off.

"Wonderful bloodhounds these detectives are! How quickly they have run to earth the murderer, isn't it?" I remarked to Mr James Walker, after I had read this account.

"Yes, very," replied the digger, with a thoughtful expression in his grey eyes, as he went on smoking.

That night I had rather a curious dream, which I suppose must have been caused by the tragic event which filled all our minds at the time.

I dreamt that we were sitting at breakfast in the inner room, where we usually had breakfast, when, on looking up, I saw the murdered woman standing at the other side of the glass door, and looking in upon us, with her ill-fitting wig all to one side.

Next morning, when we had taken our seats, I said to Mrs Latour,—

"Do you know, I had a funny dream connected with this murder case last night?"

"What was it, Luck?" asked the others.

"Well, we were all sitting just as we are now, when I saw the victim appear at that glass door— Good God! and there she is now."

For a moment each head was turned towards the door, and transfixed with horror, for there, pressing her face against the glass, and looking at us, with her wig on the one side, as in my dream, stood the murdered woman as I had dreamt about her.

I used to imagine that I had some courage, as I suppose most of the others did, but at the sudden sight of that apparition I felt frozen with horror. Mr Latour went under the table in no time, most of the others made a wild rush for the back door, where I would have followed had I been able; but this was impossible, for the bulky landlady, in her fright, went off into a dead faint, dragging me with one hand, as she fell, from my chair to the ground, where she dropped with her full weight upon me, squashing me completely, and pinning me down so that I could not move.

Jenkins had also risen to make the rush out, but had been caught by the fainting woman, and was now brought to his knees by the skin of his wrist, which she had frantically clutched with her finger and thumb, and now held on, pinching him dreadfully.

The only man amongst us who at all retained his presence of mind was the miner, James Walker. He still occupied his seat, and looked on quietly.

After a pause, which seemed like hours as I lay there with that dead weight above me, I saw the glass door open, and then the spectre was within the room, and staring at us strangely.

"What is the meaning of this upset?" asked the ghost, in a very matter-of-fact tone, in which astonishment and indignation were blended.

"Go away—please go away, dead woman," murmured Mr Latour from under the table.

The reply shocked me, for, from a spirit three days removed from its earthly tabernacle, whether male or female—female particularly—it was shocking in the extreme.

"Why in the devil's name should I go away? I paid you for my board and lodgings, didn't I, before I left?"

"Yes, yes; we have no claims against you, only please go away."

"But, by Jingo, I have a claim against you," shouted the spirit angrily.

"Oh!" from under the table.

"Yes; I have come back for my bundle, and I'll have it, too, before I go away, and no blooming 'umbug about that."

"t's not here," groaned the hidden landlord dismally.

"Where is it then?"

"In the deadhouse along with your body, and you must know it without haunting us like this."

The spirit looked dazed for a moment, and then all at once burst into such a hearty fit of laughter that she had to sit down on one of the chairs, and have it out.

"O Lor'! O Lor'! I see it all now. I heard about the murder last night. And so you thought I was the party, did you?"

What did it all mean? This was no dead woman, sure enough, for, as she spoke, she gave me a most substantial kick with her boot in the part nearest to her which was exposed, and with that unmistakable token my fears evaporated, and sufficient strength returned to enable me to wriggle from my predicament, and get upon my feet, very much ashamed of my ridiculous exhibition.

Jenkins' senses also returned, and with them the acute sensation of agony.

"Sh-sh-she has g-g-got me b-b-by the skin, and I ca-ca-cannot get away," he shrieked helplessly.

After a time we had the poor ex-captain released, and the landlady up to her bed. No easy task that, yet, with our combined efforts, we managed it successfully; and while her husband rushed off for the doctor, we questioned the mother of Theresa.

She had met her daughter at the boat, and had accompanied her to some friends at Fitzroy, where they were living for the past three days, too busy enjoying themselves to have time to look at a newspaper, so that they had been all unconscious of the search after them; and now she had come in person to prove that we had been mistaken.

By the time she had finished her narrative, the doctor arrived, and at his heels the nurse. Then after a little time he once more came downstairs, and announced to Mr Latour that it was all over satisfactorily, and that he was the happy father of a fine sturdy boy, but that everything was progressing favourably.

"Ah, she was right after all," exclaimed the delighted father, joyfully rubbing his hands, and going out to inform his cook, Fernandez, about the happy event.

The mother of Columbine went down at once to the

prison and claimed her bundle, while proving beyond dispute that she was very much alive, and never had been dead, so that the poor detectives had to start on a fresh scent. The disreputable soldier whom they had arrested had been able to clear himself beyond even the slightest suspicion, for he had been confined to his barracks for bad conduct for five days before the murder, and only liberated on the morning of his arrest, and about an hour after his almost fatal shave.

Who was the murdered woman, then? When the detective came up, and saw for himself that Mrs Latour could not leave her bed, I volunteered to go in her stead, as I had been for some time in the house, and knew all who were in it. So together we went down to rectify, as far as possible, the mistake Mrs Latour, in her blind fear, had made.

I was prepared for the body that I saw, stretched out and covered, before the cloth was removed from her face, and so identified it at the first glance.

Poor Maria, the reckless and unfortunate servant-woman, who had not returned from her last outing, now lay before me in all the pale majesty of death, with the traces of her misery lifted from her, and looking something as she may have done when the man, who had forsaken her, first met her, a trusting and a sinless woman.

CHAPTER XII.

AN EVENING IN LITTLE BOURKE STREET.

LITTLE Dicky Walker came back to his father the day before Christmas, but without bringing any more baggage than he could carry easily in a pocket-handkerchief. He had left his school-books behind him, and had won no prizes—at least he had none to show us with him, and was not at all communicative on the subject.

A wonderful little fellow that for self-control and sedateness. I don't somehow fancy that he had been at a very good school, or attended much to his instruction but he had

the natural gift of silence with which to cover his ignorance. He had no curiosity, therefore asked no boyish questions, so that he never betrayed himself, but appeared, as he sat gravely looking at the people about him, to be reckoning them all up in his own mind, and judging them for himself.

Jim Wood also dropped in upon us on Christmas Eve. His people had come to town to enjoy the holidays, and were staying with some friends at St Kilda, so that for the next two weeks we would be able to see each other occasionally, at such times as our duties permitted.

Jim was rather shocked when he heard the kind of billet I had got into. As a country-bred lad, his experience had been limited to the travelling performers, who were regarded as vagrants and treated as impecunious and disreputable tramps. It seemed to him too decided a drop in the social scale for me to take when I might have been a stable-boy, if I could do no better; but to become a "hactor, of all trades." Poor Jim lived too far removed from those societies who have of late defied the followers of Melpomene and Themis, so that he could not be expected to know that I was upon the lowest rungs of a ladder which was considered the highest honour for an aristocrat to climb.

Personally, however, the more I saw behind the scenes the less I became enamoured of the life I was leading. Of course, we were in the position of vile serfs; therefore, being without hopes of promotion, were to a great extent removed from the higher and more intricate spheres of intrigue and jealousies, yet as some of the actors and actresses intrigued and lied, and double-shuffled in this world for better parts from the stage managers and proprietors, so those who wished for a passable life of peace were forced to fawn upon and spy and lie to the diminutive super-chief, who ruled us like a tiny Nero.

Neither Jenkins nor I were very good at flattery, while we were perfect duffers at the difficult arts of lying and spying, so that we were not two days enrolled on the pantomime staff than we had the pleasure of knowing by many signs that we were regarded with suspicion and dislike by our super-chief as "blooming swells," who wanted taking down a peg or two. This "taking-down process" consisted principally of marking us out for the most obnoxious tasks, such

as laying down carpets and snow cloths, moving off or bringing on tables, chairs, rocks and other properties in the full presence of the audience, while the gods greeted our entrance and exit with uproarious mocking jeers and personal remarks, anything but flattering. These tasks the sycophants could always escape, being generally reserved for those persons who had fallen out of favour with the little tyrant, therefore they always fell to us, so that our faces before long became almost as familiar to our nightly tormenters as were those of the "stars," and we generally received as many offerings thrown to us, only with the difference of the gifts being rancid vegetables and other tokens of the like nature instead of floral wreaths. A supernumerary who is punished in this way has by no means the most enviable of lots.

The young ladies of the ballet were another of our troubles, and cost Jenkins and I no small care in our diplomatic efforts to keep them pleasant, and yet at arm's length. They were, of course, plentifully provided with admirers outside, yet some of them had selected favourites from the supers as well to talk to during off moments, and be guarded by when not otherwise engaged; and as we were perhaps a little better dressed than most of the other supers, we were not very long left without distinct offers from these particularly frank and straightforward sirens.

At first they were all very affable and kind to a degree, which was pleasant enough for us; then, as they saw us evade their advances, they turned spiteful, and united with our tyrant to make things disagreeable to us. Trap-doors were left open at dark places where we were sent messages, and into which, had we fallen, might have terminated our earthly business. They combined to make us appear ridiculous when on the stage, laid complaints to the manager about our awkwardness, and accused us of all sorts of things, as spiteful women will do when bent on revenge.

Still, we had our consolations and our friends; the manager had grown to like us, and, with the Columbine and that small-part actress Jessie Carew, kept us from being persecuted past endurance, and so we managed to rub along on our fifteen shillings per week.

The Columbine was a merry, bold, black-eyed, big-mouthed and audacious girl of about twenty, brought up to the stage from her infancy, with as little prudery about her as an

artist's model. If short of rouge or powder while dressing, she would leave her own, and enter the nearest dressing-room, to borrow what she required without the slightest regard either for her own state of *deshabille* or that of the party whose sanctum she had invaded; yet, for all that, she did this with such perfect unconsciousness that no one seemed to think anything about it. Her limbs had been public property since ever she could use them or display them, and she did not trouble herself about who saw them, or how they were covered. Yet she was a good-natured girl, fond of her mother, and not at all shy about speaking out where she saw an occasion. As I had been introduced to her by her mother, she took me under her wing, and generally acted as a kind of small Providence to us, so that we had cause to be grateful to her.

Jessie Carew was a very indifferent actress, and only fit for very small parts; but as she looked well, walked and talked easily, the manager favoured her a good deal. She was country-bred, having been brought up on the Dandenong Ranges, blue-eyed and healthy, with a figure developed by hardy exercise to firm perfection. Amongst the utility men she was greatly respected for her muscular power and scientific fists, having knocked several of them over at different times when they had presumed upon her off-hand, free-and-easy manner. She was only beginning her theatrical career, but took to it very naturally, and, being without fear, could always be depended in the transformation scene for the highest perch.

As James Walker had let her know about me, we became fast friends, and when she wanted a message conveyed to him, she always fixed upon me as her messenger, and very often permitted me to accompany her home along with her sweetheart.

On Christmas eve, after the theatre was over, we made a night of it in Little Bourke Street. James Walker, Stringy Bark and Dicky met us at the stage-door, where the Columbine joined us, and together we went through the opium and gambling dens, finishing up with an after-midnight supper of long soup and hashed chickens at the establishment of Ah Kum, the Chinese tea merchant and fan-tan banker.

Stringy Bark was in his element, and sportive, for he was well known in this Chinese quarter, and showed us over it like a proprietor; somehow, however, I didn't think that the Walker party were quite strangers to the locality, although they permitted themselves to be guided and patronised by Stringy Bark.

Ah Kum received us as if he had expected our visit, and I noticed a look very like recognition pass between him and my friend Walker; while as for young Dicky, the bland celestial received him with a happy smile, and stroked the lad's cheeks quite fondly as he led us inside.

Stringy and the Columbine tried the tables, which were in full swing as we entered, and won a considerable amount, which put them both in high good temper for the rest of the night; but as neither Jenkins nor myself had any money to risk, we had to content ourselves with looking on.

It was a closely packed room, with a large kerosine lamp on the table, at which sat the Chinese markers, with their painted tickets before them; and where we moved about was in shadow, so that it was not easy to distinguish the faces of the gamblers, except when patches of light fell upon them, and for a moment brought them into relief. As a rule, the gamblers seemed to prefer the shadow.

A good mingling of sexes, ages and nationalities were there, but all very sedate and silent. I saw, as James Walker and Dicky moved about the crowd after the landlord, that they seemed to be making acquaintances amongst some of the men; a word, perhaps, would be exchanged, and a slight nod. Jessie Carew, also, as she stood by herself, soon had a few of the ladies about her, who also nodded quietly as they left her, and went back to the game.

We went into several places after this, passing along dark and silent lanes. Sometimes a figure would brush against us in the passing, and apologise. After James Walker had said "All right," we never appeared to be left long by ourselves.

"The detectives are expected to-night, I can see," said Stringy Bark.

"Do you say so?" answered Walker.

"Yes, they are on the look-out, that's why we meet so many passengers; you bet some plant is on that we know nothing about."

"Ah, that explains it; I was wondering at the crowd."

"Oh, you're all right with me," answered our small guide patronisingly. "They know me in this locality, and trust me."

After going into several opium dens and tea shops, Stringy took us into an English house, where a very low assemblage of boisterous revellers were gathered, comprised of half-dressed abandoned women and jail-birds of the commoner sort, as in the other portion of Little Bourke Street. We had evidently been expected here, for they received us without surprise, but made us all heartily welcome in a rough fashion. Most of them had been drinking heavily, and were more or less intoxicated, therefore hailed the order which Walker gave for more drink with loud exclamations of delight.

They were a most degraded company of women and ruffians of the lowest and coarsest type. Swollen and bloated young women, lightly clad—for the night was sultry in the extreme, and this nest of iniquity stuffy and foul smelling. Young women with their arms bare, yet tattooed lavishly with mermaids, ships in full sail and initials, so that they appeared clad with tight-fitting jerseys of fantastic blue and red patterns. Old women were there also, with hideous vice-stamped features, veritable hags all of them. The men were mostly young and heavily-built, with sullen brows and bloodshot eyes, although here and there one saw a white-faced, sickly, yet vicious young face, or a grey-haired demure old face, shaven like priests, yet stubbly-chinned and sinister in their glances.

"The wickedest thieves' den in Melbourne," whispered Stringy as we entered.

Yes, no one could mistake their calling—house-breaking, robbery with violence, murder. It was a good-sized room, with a passage beyond, leading probably to the vile sleeping quarters; a long table stood in the centre, with a few broken-backed chairs and stools occupied, while the rest of the company stood or lay about on the bare and dirty boards.

"Happy to see you, captain," said one old hag, getting up from her stool to welcome us. She looked at and spoke to the miner.

"I don't happen to be a captain," answered Walker, with what I thought was a warning glance at the old woman.

"Oh, ain't you? Well, that's 'all right,' then."

"Yes, it's 'all right,'" replied James Walker.

At this time Jessie Carew had me by the arm, and was engrossing a great deal of my attention. Stringy Bark had picked up a lady-like girl at one of the opium dens, and was now engaged with her, while Jenkins was making himself agreeable to the Columbine.

"I am hungry," observed Jessie to me. "Let us leave this crowd and get back to supper; Jim, you stand supper to-night, you know."

"Yes; Ah Kum is getting it ready for us. Let's go back there, if you have seen enough of this," replied her sweetheart.

We had seen enough of Little Bourke Street life for one night, and turned to retrace our steps through these narrow side-lanes and back passages, Jessie Carew still with me, and chatting away to me in a confidential manner.

"Aren't you about tired of theatrical life now? I am."

"Yes; I wouldn't mind changing it for some other trade if I could find an opening," I replied.

"Oh, there's lots of other things to do up country. You should speak to Jim; he'll put you up to something—if you can ride well."

"Yes, I daresay I can stick on horseback tolerably well."

"Bareback as well as saddle?" asked the girl quickly.

"Yes; it don't matter to me much which way I ride. I learnt that in my young days, if nothing else."

"So can I, wild or broken. I love horses, and so does Jim. If it had been a circus instead of a pantomime, I could have shown them some rough bush riding; but what is acting?—bah! no sort of excitement at all."

"You like excitement, Miss Carew?"

"Of course; don't you?"

"Yes, a little more than we get at the Theatre Royal," I replied, as we entered Ah Kum's establishment.

"Well, wait a bit and you'll have it. I'll speak to Jim for you."

"Thank you, Miss Carew"

In the supper-room there were a good number of men and women sitting when we entered, eating or smoking. Walker left me to entertain Jessie Carew, and, after supper, got into conversation with some of the strangers.

"I think I'll go home," remarked my companion at last.

"I see Jim is interested with his new friends. Will you see me home?"

"With pleasure, if Mr Walker doesn't object?"

"Not at all," replied James Walker. "See Jessie to her lodgings, Luck, and oblige me."

So we two left them behind, Stringy Bark getting rapidly intoxicated with his fair friend, and Jenkins making violent love to the merry Columbine, while Dicky stood beside his father and listened gravely to what he was saying.

"Better swap coats and hats," observed the miner, as we rose to go. "Jessie's landlady is particular, and knows me, so she'll think it all right if she sees that, since it is so late."

While thinking that he wasn't very gallant to his lover to stay behind, I changed with him, and then we went out to the morning air. Jessie lodged at Fitzroy, so that we had a pleasant walk through the gardens, and an interesting talk.

"Is that a man following us?" asked Jessie, as we got out of Bourke Street.

I glanced round and saw what I took to be two figures slouching after us in the shadow.

"There seems to be two men there; shall I hail them?"

"No; let us go on and take no notice of them," she answered hurriedly, as she took my arm, and drew me along more quickly.

She told me a good deal about herself and her lover during that walk. Her education had been rather of a masculine and athletic sort, while Walker was one of the best horsemen in the colonies. She did not expect to stay long in Melbourne, and again urged me to trust entirely in Jim, who would see me out of my difficulties, and put me into a good way of living.

"He likes you, and trusts you, as you must have seen, and when once Jim likes a fellow, he sticks to him like death."

I felt very much flattered at all this, and after I had seen my charge inside—for she insisted on me coming in for a moment till she had lighted her lamp—I said good-night, and left her, going home a little dazed with all I had seen and partaken of during the night.

I fancied once or twice that I was still followed during that walk, but if so, my followers kept too far in the rear for me to interrogate them; besides, I felt too tired out and careless to pay any attention to their movements. Fer-

nandez let me in, and told me that Jenkins had not yet returned, so that I went upstairs and tumbled into bed without troubling myself any more about him.

Next day, or rather that same day, I rose late, and found my own coat and hat by the side of my bed, while Jenkins was still absent. He came in while I was having breakfast, looking seedy, and saying that he had fallen asleep in the supper-room, and found himself lying on one of the opium couches in the morning.

As we were talking, our old friend the detective looked in, as he often did, and had some breakfast. He asked us how we had spent the night, and laughed heartily when he heard that Jenkins had been overcome.

"Rare fellow Ah Kum, I can tell you. Is Mr Walker up yet?"

Mr Latour answered that he hadn't come home, but had sent word that he was off to the country for a day or two.

The detective looked at the landlord attentively for a moment or two as he heard this, and then changed the conversation to the murder.

They were still without a clue beyond that tuft of red hair, and were trying to discover the antecedents of the victim Maria. That mistake of Mrs Latour's had driven them for the present all astray.

"How is the baby, landlord?"

"Beautiful," answered the pleased father. "You must come to de christening."

"I will. What are you going to call him?"

"Antonio, I think."

"A good name, Anthony," remarked the officer, rising to go.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MIDNIGHT MISSION.

CHRISTMAS DAY Jenkins and I spent with our shipmates, Jim Wood and his fellow-servants Bessie Watson and Elsie Kemp at St Kilda. The family were all making merry upstairs, and did not object to us doing the same in the kitchen.

After our late experience in the theatrical life, it did not appear at all an undignified thing for us to dine with the servants, and at the expense of their master ; no sacrifice at all of dignity that our repast should take place after the dinner was removed from the dining-room. There was plenty of it and to spare, and our hosts were lavish and merry, not allowing themselves to be put out of temper by the ringing of the bells while they were waiting on us ; the guests above had to do the best they could until our hosts were at leisure to attend upon them ; indeed, as a rule, the first and second appeal from the dining-room made no more impression in the kitchen than if the clapper had been removed from the bell, for servants in the colony are regardful of their own dignity, and masters and mistresses are expected to cultivate the god-like quality of patience.

Amongst the visitors who were staying in the house was a social reformer, who had come to Australia on a lecturing tour, Mr Charles Chumply. He had a fine turn for eloquence, a silvery voice which rang out like a bugle, and he was one of the finest praying men that had ever visited the colonies. I had listened to his orations several times, for he used to hire and fill the theatre of a Sunday ; he was a very great favourite in society, and the honoured guest at the house.

When Elsie had seen them all safely into the drawing-room, and finished tidying up the parson's bedroom, we were at liberty to spend the evening as we liked, and a very pleasant night we had of it until just before the parting, when a somewhat unpleasant incident happened, which caused us all to regret that we had come.

Just as we were sitting down to supper, Elsie was called upstairs, and instead of coming back again, as we naturally expected, the master, with the pastor, followed by two or three of the guests, came into the kitchen, and, locking the door, ordered us all to sit apart and wait until the policemen arrived. Mr Charles Chumply had been robbed of a valuable signet ring which he had left on his dressing-table that evening, and, with the promptitude of a man of morality, charged poor Elsie with being the thief. Elsie was at that moment also a prisoner in the drawing-room, waiting, as we were, to be searched.

It was an uncomfortable position to be in, but we had no option, so we submitted with the best grace we could, all

the time listening to that silvery voice rebuking the master for permitting followers to his servants.

Very soon the officers arrived, who, beginning with Elsie, searched us all very particularly, without finding the ring.

"Are you quite sure, sir, that you have not mislaid that ring?" asked the sergeant gravely of the angry lecturer.

"Perfectly certain; I laid it on my dressing-table before going down to dinner, and this servant was the only person who has been in it since, unless she has admitted some of her accomplices."

"Then you charge her with the theft?"

"Yes," promptly replied the reformer.

After that there was nothing else to do except to take my little favourite to prison. I did not regard Mr Chumply very kindly, nor did the other visitors, for some of them even offered to make good the loss if he would overlook it; but he was firm, as only a good professor of morality could be, so that our Christmas Day finished up very miserably.

On the second day after this, Elsie was brought up before the magistrates, but as nothing had been proven definitely against her, in spite of her accuser's vehemence, she was discharged, but with her character blackened.

Elsie, on her acquittal, would not speak to any of us, but slipped quietly out of the way, sending for her box; and so for a time she disappeared.

About three weeks after this, Mr Charles Chumply was glad to go away also, for it was discovered that his wife had taken the ring with her to Sydney, where she had preceded him on a visit. What made the case against him worse was that, after he had discovered his mistake, he was too proud to own it to any one, but went about as usual, allowing the cloud still to rest on the absent girl.

However, the ubiquitous reporter ferreted out what this reforming gentleman tried to keep dark, and then Mr Charles Chumply became the subject of much public and press comment, and was glad to sneak after his wife. They are so bold, some of these good men in their rectitude, when accusing wrongdoers, and so modest when it comes to admitting their own mistakes.

I was happy, however, for the sake of poor Elsie, and trusted that she would see the papers, and come back to her situation and friends.

Elsie did see the papers, and read how they had avenged that first wrong, but they were too late to repair the second wrong that this preacher had done her, for, driven desperate by her unwonted shame, and afraid to look after another situation, she had been forced to take to the streets. That was where we discovered her at last, and which life she refused to quit; being damned by this virtuous man, and having nothing left to live for, she was obstinate in going her own way, leaving the sin of it all upon his respectable shoulders.

Poor Elsie! I met her often after she had abandoned herself. Sometimes she used to walk with me to the length of the stage door before setting out for the evening, treating all my remonstrances with a mocking lightness, or with the bitter words,—

“If there is a God at all, He will damn that liar as He has damned me; so let me alone, Luck, to go my own road, and you go yours, old boy.”

I don't know how it was, but I could not enter a church door for a long time after that, or listen even to an open-air prayer, without turning sick, particularly if the preacher was easy and flowing in his language.

I heard afterwards that Mr Charles Chumply was soon pardoned by society for his slight offence, and became more popular than ever, particularly amongst the sentimental and pious ladies, his voice was so clear and melodious, and his sentences so beautifully rounded. He made a most successful tour through the colonies in a pecuniary sense, and returned to his own society in England happy, healthy and wealthy. Perhaps his reward is reserved for him in a future state, where his silver tongue won't be able to influence his judges in his favour.

I was rather surprised at the miner going away so suddenly without saying a word to me or wishing his sweetheart good-bye. However, he had always been unemotional. I saw Stringy Bark on Boxing Day, who informed me that one of the miners at the opium den had put Walker up to the lay of a new field, and that he made up his mind on the spot, and was off to prospect it, Dicky going a little way out of town with him, after which the little boy was coming back to be office-boy to Mr Hardwake.

“He will sleep in the office at night, and will be always

on the spot when I'm out, to prevent that hocussing business with the governor. Lord, I never saw a man get so nervous as Hardwake has been since that robbery. Must have been more than chloroform, I'm thinking, for he can hardly bear to be alone, and looks horribly frightened sometimes when I come upon him suddenly."

I had a chance of speaking to Jessie Carew that night during scene-shifting. She had heard from her lover also, and seemed quite satisfied with his reason.

"Jim always meant business wherever he went," she said confidently, "and we should be sure to hear of that 'rush' if he had taken it up."

Two days afterwards Dicky appeared at Mrs Latour's just as I was setting out for the theatre. He had a bundle tied up with brown paper, which he asked me to give to Jessie. It was a compact bundle, and remarkably heavy for its size; and when I joked with him about it, he said that they were some specimens from the new field, which his father had bought from a digger on the road coming down, and that Jessie knew where to take them to be tested.

"Which road has your father gone, Dicky?"

"Bush road," replied Dicky, with that discretion which never deserted him; after which he glided away towards the office of *The Financial Diver*.

I took the packet, and handed it to Jessie Carew as I passed her dressing-room that night, and then went on to my duties as usual.

Pantomime time is a busy one for the subordinates. Jenkins and I were demons in the first scene, guileless country rustics in the second, large-headed warders in the ogre's castle, besides a dozen other rapid changes before the transformation and harlequin period, so that, by the time the last scene fell, we were usually pretty well tired out, and ready for bed.

After Christmas week, Jim Wood's family went back again to their country house, which had been shut up during their absence. He rode back again to town the next day in hot haste, once more to fetch the police, for during their absence the house had been broken into, and completely cleared out as far as valuables, and money to a considerable amount. Since the advent of Mr Charles Chumply, this master of Jim's seemed to have been marked

out by misfortune. Sailors say that reformers are unlucky passengers to have on board a ship; perhaps the same applies to people whom they visit.

I had one or two letters from Sabina Condon since she returned home; indeed, she was a fairly constant correspondent, and wrote a pretty light hand, which always gave me a warm sensation in its feminine quality. It was out of fashion, I know, and would have been condemned by modern boarding-schools, who teach pupils to write in a large and dashing style, and so disguise their sex as far as possible. Yet the small, sharp, delicate characters always struck me as being most appropriate to girlhood and womanhood, and whereas I might have torn up the dashy notes without a sensation, I carefully preserved these little missives. She spoke mostly about the dog Bernard, who seemed contented with his new home; then, with a few kind inquiries about her friends in Little Collins Street, wound up by saying that they were all well at the station, and trusted that I would visit them before long.

I was not proud enough of my present position to tell her what I was doing to earn a living, or that it was most unlikely that I should ever visit her, unless something very unforeseen turned up. My clothes were getting too shabby and scanty to visit any one respectable, and I was gradually dropping down to that condition when only the like of Elsie Kemp would care to stop and talk to me. My clothes were getting frayed at the edges, and almost transparent at the knees and elbows; while my only pair of boots were beginning to leak, without a chance of getting them mended—so that I no longer cared to walk out during the day, but slunk down the side streets when I had to go to the theatre. Sabina's letters, although I began to look forward to them eagerly, always left me very discontented, and mutinous with my lot as a supernumerary, and, without knowing what Fate had in store for me, I took a grim pleasure in feeling that I would be discharged as soon as the pantomime was withdrawn.

About this time Jenkins and I parted. He had received a letter from England, with an order on a Melbourne merchant to provide him with a passage home again; and, as he had had enough of colonial experience, he left gladly. I was sorry to lose him, yet glad for his sake; and he was sorry that he could not leave me any money, for, by the con-

ditions, he got no more than his outfit and passage. However, he managed to order an extra suit, and new pair of boots for me, for which I was very grateful. We were too good friends for me to refuse this favour from Jenkins, and, after I had seen him off, I returned to the boarding-house, feeling for the first time really friendless.

A few nights after this, Jessie Carew called me into her dressing-room and said,—

“Luck, I want you to do me a favour to-night; will you?”

“Of course. That goes without saying, Miss Carew. What is it?”

“Well, after theatre I want you to take the Kelmore Road—that’s where the new diggings are, you know, where Jim is. Outside the town you will see a little shanty called ‘The Diggers’ Rest.’ Knock the landlord up, and give him this note. In return he will provide you with a good horse, and you will ride on until you meet Jim, and give him this parcel. He cannot spare time just now to come to Melbourne, or I wouldn’t trouble you.”

“It’s no trouble. In fact, the ride will do me good,” I replied.

“That’s all right. I’ll wait for you at the theatre door, and give you my packet then.”

Jessie met me according to appointment, and gave me a little packet which I could easily put into my pocket; then, pointing up the street, she whispered,—

“Dicky is over there; follow him, and he will tell you what to do. Good-night.”

She walked quickly away from me in the opposite direction, and, after going a few steps as she had pointed, I felt my arm touched by Dicky, who, without speaking, led me into one of the side slums.

Two women passed us as we dived into the darkness, who took up their posts at the entrance, then Dicky pushed aside some loose palings of a fence, and, signifying that I was to follow him, he crept inside to a very dirty yard.

I was considerably startled by all these precautions over a simple message, but I did not make any remark, while the boy, still holding me by the arm, entered the open door of a seemingly deserted house, passed through it, and out by another yard into a similar lane to the first, by which we reached Elizabeth Street.

"That is your road—straight on. Keep to the shadow side," said the boy softly, after which he slid back again into the lane, and left me alone.

I walked quickly along on the dark side of the streets, with the full moon silvering the other sides, and making the houses stand out like sunlight, almost. I met no one, for I kept to the side streets, and it was now past midnight.

After about an hour's walking, I had cleared the city, and got into the open road, and soon after arrived at the "Diggers' Rest."

The landlord was not at all difficult to rouse up. I suppose he had just put the lights out, for at my second knock he came to the door in shirt and trousers, and seeing the note in my hand, took it without remark, and read it by the light of the moon.

"You got this from the young lady herself, did you?"

"Yes."

"And your name?"

"Luck Mort."

"Who showed you the way to here?"

"Dicky Walker."

"All right; then here's your horse. Ride on that way until you meet the captain."

He opened the yard gate, and led out a splendid mount all ready saddled and bridled. As I was getting up he said,—

"I don't suppose you were followed if Dicky was with you at the start?"

"No; I don't think I have been."

"So long. I'll have breakfast ready for you when you come back."

For the next two hours I rode along the highway, with the gum trees on either side, some of the ringed ones looking very ghostly with their white bare branches. A delicious ride, with the cool morning air fanning my cheeks, and that great white moon lying above me amongst the clustering and fiery stars, and making each object as distinct as if seen by noontime. A silent ride, which made the thought of the theatre more obnoxious than ever to me.

Who was James Walker? I had heard him twice called "Captain." Although not very curious by nature, I felt a little inquisitive over this.

At last, as I neared a denser portion of the bush, I saw him, also on horseback, taking up the centre of the road, and evidently waiting on me.

He was dressed like a stock-rider, in tight-fitting corded pants, red shirt and panama hat—a dashing figure he appeared to be ; while as for his horse, I could not find words to express my admiration for that animal. It was the perfection of horse-flesh, coal black, glossy and without a flaw.

“ Good morning, Luck ; glad to see you, but sorry to have troubled you coming so far. Have you got Jessie’s present ? ”

“ Yes, Walker, here it is all safe. ”

He took the packet in his hand, and looked at the outside for a moment or two without speaking, then he turned to me.

“ Did Jessie tell you what is in this little bundle ? ”

“ No ; it appeared to be something of value, from the extra precautions she took to get it safely into your hands. ”

“ It is valuable, Luck ; it is my miner’s sole right to work a remarkably good gold field, if I like to use it that way. Look at it for yourself. ”

He handed the packet over to me, and told me to open it up.

“ I want you to see what you have given to me, so that there might be no mistake afterwards. Open it and examine the contents carefully. ”

I opened the packet, and felt a little disappointed when I came to the contents—only a stage wig and beard of a bright red colour.

“ Well, Luck, what do you make of it ? ”

“ Nothing. ”

“ Do you see where that side has been cut off ? ”

“ Yes, but— Gracious heavens, Walker, ” I suddenly cried, starting back in horror from him, “ that tuft of hair which Maria had in her dead hand. ”

“ Yes, exactly so. I have discovered the murderer, at least smart Dicky did for me, and now the question is, whether I shall bleed him by slow degrees, or hang him straight away. ”

“ Then the wig is not yours ? ”

“ Mine, Luck ! ” He drew himself up in the saddle, while the light flamed from his grey eyes for a moment, as I knew it would do when I saw him first ; then it died out again

while he sank back on his seat with an easy laugh. "Yes, it will be mine when you have handed it over to me although I never saw it before."

"Take it, Walker, and forgive me," I muttered, shuddering, as I handed the loathed object over to him, which he wrapped up again and stuffed into his belt.

"I forgive you, Luck, freely, for your suspicions were but natural under the circumstances, only I want you to remember how you received it, and how you delivered it to me."

"What are you, Walker—a detective?"

"Not exactly, although this business is a little like it. In the first place, I hope you consider me to be a good friend to you, do you?"

"Yes, Walker, I do."

"And one I could trust with my life if it came to the pinch, eh?"

"Yes, I think you may go that length."

"Your hand on it, Luck, my boy."

We clasped hands between the horses, and looked at each other, as men who have pledged faith and friendship only can clasp and look.

"Now, Luck Mort, I shall indeed trust you with my life, for I want you to look after my girl, Jessie Carew. Who am I, did you ask?"

"Yes."

"Captain Rainbow, the bushranger, at your service."

CHAPTER XIV.

CAPTAIN RAINBOW TELLS HIS STORY.

I THINK it becomes a man best, when writing his autobiography, to state exactly how he acted, and from what motives, leaving the reader to judge his character for himself. If he acts unwisely or dishonourably at any time, by narrating the slip plainly, and without seeking about for an excuse, he may outrage the propriety of many, but he is almost certain to find some sympathetic readers who would have acted exactly the same if similarly situated,—humanity is so much alike in its texture and fibre under the varnish, and in spite of the extra high polish some surfaces have received.

I know a few of my failings, although doubtless the reader has already discovered many more than I know about myself, for I have tried to be candid with him as far as memory and power of expression would allow me. I am perfectly aware that I have not got the smallest sense of dignity about me, and could never be able to cut a friend, no matter how shabby he may have treated me; as a rule, I have to be cut before I can summon up pluck enough to be able to pass the man or woman as a stranger whom I have once known. That is an art above me, yet which Stringy Bark had to perfection; but then he had pluck enough for anything.

I am afraid also that there must be rather a large assemblage of disreputable microbes in my composition, a hereditary inclination towards more broader boundaries than mere Bohemianism, for although the sight of that red wig and beard shocked me deeply, I wasn't in the slightest degree appalled at the somewhat startling announcement which terminated my last chapter, as long as he, Rainbow, had taken no life treacherously, and did not expect me to join him in stealing. I did not feel the least repugnance to my friend James Walker because he happened to be Captain Rainbow, the notorious bushranger. I could still drink with him, talk with him, and help him to escape from justice, so long as he kept his hands free of cold-blooded murder, and for that I fancied I could depend upon him. For the rest of his actions against society, I was not capable of judging him, any more than I could judge Elsie Kemp, for as yet I had not been tempted, so therefore could not say whether I should be able to resist or forced to yield.

"Well, Luck Mort, you know me at last," observed Captain Rainbow, with a smile, after a pause during which we had looked each other over. "Do you regret giving me your hand and pledging your friendship with me?"

"I do not in the least regret our friendship, for that was beyond recall; but I do regret finding my friend James Walker in Captain Rainbow—for his own sake, I mean."

"You are a good fellow, Luck, and I also wish that my character could be changed, but that is impossible now."

"Why so, old chap? Can you not alter your life, and, with the money you must have made, get out of the colony?"

"No, Luck, I am as much a prisoner as I was when on the chain-gang, with less prospect of escape, and as poor a man to-night as you are, in spite of all that I have been able to steal. You have an hour or so to spare before you need go back to Melbourne: ride with me a little way, and I'll tell you all about it."

The moon was still shining brightly, although sinking gradually towards the west as we turned our horses together and walked them slowly along the bush road.

"The police are hunting after me a hundred miles from here, so that I am pretty safe on this line, although this is as close to Melbourne as I dare venture for the present," begun my companion, as a prelude to his history.

"How do you know where the police are just now?"

"Because I have my paid agents everywhere throughout this part of Victoria, who warn me of danger and put the Government on wrong scents; these are the gang who keep me poor—protectors and jailors. A bushranger now-a-days can only be a road agent in the strictest sense; the newspapers let them know every cent that we steal, and only so long as we are fortunate enough to get plenty, and honest enough to divide it all over the factory, have we a chance left. Of course there are a few chances, such as that three thousand pounds Jessie and I took from that scoundrel Hardwake, who dare not publish his loss, that we are able to keep to ourselves."

"Then it was you who robbed the editor of the *Under-current Searcher*?"

"Not rob—I took the loot back again from a contemptible robber, that was all, and I reckon it to be a good action. Jessie has it safe enough, although it isn't likely to be of much use to me, except, perhaps, to pay for an advocate when I am caught, as, of course, I shall be sometime. When I first arrived in the colonies, I was only a lad a trifle older than Dicky, but not nearly so world-wise; in fact, I was an open-hearted duffer who was for ever trying to make friends, and getting for my pains only enemies, as people who wear their hearts on their sleeves do. All that happened, of course, in my tender days, when I was enthusiastic and trusting enough in humanity to make myself the most heartily hated youth of my time.

"Then, by Jove, Walker, you must either have been an

actor, a painter, an author, a musician, or a reformer in your young days, with something original about you, or you would never have reached to that proud distinction."

"Yes; I began my career as an author under my own name, of course, which is not Walker, and which there is no use telling you now, since it is buried. I wrote and published two or three books which at the first got fair notices, but met with very indifferent success in the market, and yet, if some of these wealthy fellows only knew the value of my books, there isn't a library in Victoria would be without them, for they are to their owners when I am on their track what the blood of the paschal lamb was on the door-post when the destroying angel passed by. Who ever had the gumption to buy a book of mine when they were for sale, and provident enough to keep and display it on their shelves, are sacred to me and my gang of thieves now; we pass them over."

"Have you passed many houses over in your bushranging career?"

"Not many, Luck; the fools, as a rule, were like the earth dwellers in the days of Noah; they did not take advantage of their opportunity in time, and so are delivered into the hands of the avengers. That reminds me that your little friend Sabina Condon and her father are safe from our hands, for she has a copy of my last book."

"How do you know that, Walker?"

"Because I gave it to her before she left; and as all my men know my peculiarity, the first thing they do when they break into a strange house is to go to the book-case and overhaul it. If a book of mine is there *uncut*, they punish the owner by making him cut it and read aloud from it for his former neglect of the author, while they carry off what provisions they may require. If the book has been cut and well used, they apologise for their intrusion. When it is absent, then they take whatever they can carry."

"Have they often apologised for their intrusion in this fashion, Walker?"

"Don't chaff a disappointed author, Luck; it's mean and heartless of you; yet let me be frank. My merry men have only as yet been forced to listen to my outpourings of genius from two terrified squatters, and apologised once, and that is how they have come to consider the restriction a light

one. Sabina makes, as far as I know yet, the fourth holder of my passport of safety."

"Make me the fifth, Walker, old boy, and I promise to read every word of it, no matter how much I suffer."

"Some day I'll give you my own copy, Luck, as a final test of your friendship, but not yet, dear boy—not yet, nor need you be in a hurry, because it is only poetry."

There was such a genuine ring of pathos in my companion's voice that my heart reproached me for treating the matter with such levity, and I once more laid my hand on his, and looked at him remorsefully.

"Don't mind my chaff, old chap; you must know I didn't mean it."

"I know you didn't, and yet you were not likely to know how I value that last copy. It is battered a good deal now, for it has saved my life before this. I wear it next my heart in an inside pocket, and it holds more than one spent bullet on its cover, so that you see even poetry has its useful qualities in this nineteenth century."

"Tell me your story, Walker, from the beginning."

"It is commonplace enough as far as the world goes, tragic enough to me in its result. I wrote a book, and got praised up for it by the critics, when I was nineteen, got into a clique of narrow-minded animals who sought out my acquaintance and pretended to be my friends, all the while they were laughing at me behind my back. Stage first, indulgent mockery. I wrote and published another book, which received more favourable notices than the first, and changed their indulgence into active hatred. They combined to flatter me to my face, all the while they were putting what they termed 'spokes in my wheel' underhand, so the book which began so well ended a dead failure. Second stage.

"I could not understand the tide against me with so many apparently warm and sincere friends. One of the most assiduous of them constituted himself my most earnest admirer and to him I unbosomed myself constantly, asking and taking his advice, while trusting him with all my plans and ideas, which were constantly going wrong. Damn it, Luck, I'd have gone on believing in that Judas Iscariot until he and his colonial gang had starved and ruined me if it had not been that he got sick tired himself of playing so easy a

game, and all of a sudden bared his batteries and let me see that I had been sailing alongside of a treacherous pirate, who thought the time had come to sink me with a bold shot."

"Did he sink you?"

"Yes; but not in the way he had intended. I took his broadside, and then I turned upon him and nearly killed him. The rest of the traitors I didn't care about; they were beneath revenge, but the hound who had wormed himself into my confidence, to treat me so foully, I could not pass over. Stage third. I was imprisoned for attempted murder, and sentenced to fifteen years.

"In prison I began and finished my education as a bushranger. I got new companions, which, I think, on the whole, were honester fellows than that literary clique whom I had left outside, to damn my good name utterly. I no longer puzzled my brain over the composition of rhymes, but, instead, gave myself up to planning out our escape. Yes, those four years which I spent in jail developed new qualities in me as a leader which I never thought I possessed. I picked out the best of the long term men, and got one after the other out before I left myself; and I must say that they were not ungrateful in their way, for they had occupied their leisure in carrying out my ideas in winning over spies, both in Melbourne and the country round it. When I joined them, I found a pretty compact band, only waiting on me to commence operations on an extensive scale. I was ambitious, you see, and since I could not make a name as an author, took to the only course left open. They selected me as their captain, and they have been satisfied with their choice, for I have done my level best to cater for them."

"I suspected you were no stranger to Little Bourke Street that night we spent there."

"No; they are all paid agents of mine there, that is where I get most of my recruits from, for mine is not a factory where I can limit my workmen. As they escape or are turned out of jail, they hunt me up, and to refuse a recruit is to gain a traitor. A captain of a band like mine has to keep his eyes open, I can assure you, Luck, and step warily."

"But surely you cannot depend upon all your men, can you?"

"Only so long as I can find them plenty to do, like the friends and supporters of the ex-Emperor Louis Napoleon. Self-interest is the bond between us. Some day, of course, the band will grow too large, and the game too hot, and then my Sedan comes. I have a notion of who the traitor will be, and that is your friend Macintosh."

"But he isn't out of prison yet."

"Not yet, but when he is, according to all the laws of gravitation, he will come to me, and I shall have to take him into my family. Already his ambassadors have come, and there is no getting out of it. That is one of my obligations, and I am hemmed in on all sides."

"But surely, Walker, if you set your wits to work, you might get out of the mesh."

"Impossible, old fellow," returned my companion gloomily. "I have tried it often, and have always failed. Last time I was in Melbourne I made my last attempt, with the same result. That is how you came to see Jessie Carew on the Melbourne boards. We had planned it all so carefully that I thought we might succeed in slipping away to another country, where we might have lived honestly. Even that unexpected windfall to Hardwake appeared to be an omen of success, for it gave us what we needed badly, the sinews of war. You remember when little Dicky came first to Mrs Latour's?"

"Yes."

"He came to warn me that they were getting uneasy about me, which meant that they were getting ready to sell me. I had come to Melbourne with the avowed intention of liberating the bushrangers then in Carlton Jail, but for the real purpose of getting myself smuggled on board some ship; but they thought I was too long about my task, so Dicky was sent to hurry me up and help me."

"Your son is a preternaturally sharp boy."

"He is not my son. His father was a Chinaman, and one of my gang, who was hanged five years ago; but Dicky is a smart boy, and very true to me. Well, as you know, we got the bushrangers out all right, and then Dicky went back to soothe them over, but it was no use. When he came again on Christmas Eve it was to tell me that the game was up. They had given the hint to the detectives that 'Rainbow' was in Melbourne trying to escape, so that I

was forced to throw myself back on the protection of my agents in Little Bourke Street, and slip into harness once more. Doubtless you wondered at me changing coat and hat with you, and my sweetheart asking you instead of me to escort her home?"

"Yes, I did think it a little strange."

"We had been shadowed all the evening. I knew that they would not arrest you, because they were not sure about me being their man, and our Melbourne detectives are too 'cute to do anything hap-hazard; but, of course, the next morning, when I was missing, they were perfectly satisfied as to who had been lodging at Latour's Coffee Palace, and given them the slip."

"Is Stringy Bark one of your agents?"

"No; but he has served me unconsciously more than once before this, and did me a very good turn that night, although he will never know it. Captain Jenkins also provided me with my disguise. I expect he and the Columbine had headaches next morning."

"Yes?"

"We had to hocus their drink, and while they lay comfortably sleeping, I walked out of Melbourne as Jenkins. The Chinese are adroit valets and ladies'-maids. Dicky went with me as Miss Columbine, and after seeing me all right, returned with the borrowed clothes."

"Then I suppose that explains why Detective Smith has grown so fond of my company lately, and why Dicky smuggled me so mysteriously out of Little Bourke Street?" I said, feeling just a little nettled at being made such an easy confederate of my bushranger friend.

"You may depend upon it, Luck, that if Dicky smuggled you out, you were being followed; but you are safe enough."

"Although under suspicion."

"Oh, that will blow over all right," returned the captain coolly. "Besides, I won't ask you to run any more risks, for it would be useless now that they suspect you; neither will I ever forget what you have done for me, and the day may come when I shall be able to help you, who knows? Tell Jessie that I am all right, and take care of her; that is, old chap, keep those cursed male butterflies from annoying her while she has to stop in Melbourne. Look after her at

nights when you can, that's all I ask you as a friend to do. For herself, I can trust her anywhere, for she is staunch enough, poor girl."

"Tell me, Walker, is she your wife?"

"No, nor likely to be now, I'm afraid. We were to have been married in another country, if I had managed to get to it; but I love her too dearly to make her the wife of Captain Rainbow. She has no relations. Her father, like myself, was a bushranger. He was shot a year ago, and left her to me to take care of. Ah! Jessie has had a hard training, and can rough it bravely; but I wouldn't marry her unless I see my way out of this trap. If you are short of money, don't be afraid to ask her for some of that confiscated thief-earnings. I don't regard *it* as stolen money."

The time had come for us to part. In another half-hour daylight would be upon us, and already the moon began to look dim on the slate-coloured sky, so, with a firm clasp of the hand, I said good-bye to this peculiar mixture of poet and robber, and turning my horse's head from him, I rode briskly away, glancing at the handsome horse and rider that stood motionless in the middle of the road watching me going from them.

I had hob-nobbed for the last two hours with the most notorious bushranger in the colony, and yet felt only a yearning fondness and pity for him and his hopeless lot. Not a single twinge of moral uneasiness assailed me. Surely I must have some vagabond blood in my veins.

I was still wondering at myself for not feeling degraded, until suddenly I remembered that my ancestors were Patricians and Normans, who had come over with William the Conqueror, and then I was satisfied, for that fully accounted for my sad lack of moral perception. I had come, as they did, to a new country, and was lapsing backwards in my feelings to what they must have felt before they became landowners.

CHAPTER XV.

MELBOURNE FREE HYDROPATHIC ESTABLISHMENT.

I CANNOT say that I felt altogether flattered by the turn which the friendship of James Walker had taken. It was

not altogether disinterested, and up to now it had been a little one-sided, and my part of the contract that of the cat's-paw for the bold robber captain and his sweetheart, without much regard to my own feelings in the matter. However, I excused a great deal after his story. He had wasted so much disinterested love in his youth on unworthy objects that he might well have become a little selfish in his present danger. Any one might be the same easily if he were a bushranger with a large price on his head, who had been fortunate enough to discover a friend on whom he could rely.

The morning broke upon me beautifully as I rode back towards "The Diggers' Rest." A blushing dawn, all pulsating with pearly tenderness, moist coolness, and misty greys, as the heavy night-dew became vaporous, and trailed gauze-like between me and distant objects, every instant gathering up fresh folds from the soaking earth to the heated upper space through which the flame-shafts were travelling. It was going to be another scorching day, but as yet I was riding through a moist, cool dew vapour bath, inexpressibly soothing to my eyelids, fevered and dry for want of sleep.

The young gum-tree plants pushing up their flower-like violet and blue-green leaves from the dew-silvered spider webs, almost decorative in their delicate and negative colouring, and almost too æsthetic to be natural looking. The ivory-like trunks and branches of the trees, gleaming yellowish from the blueish misty background, with the eucalyptus aroma, wafting upwards from these tender leaves. It seemed like going through a fairy forest carved out of mother-of-pearl, so translucent were the pure tones of delicate colouring.

I had ridden a full hour before the sun rose in front of me, and almost blinded me with its white lustre, when, as I was rubbing my eyes to get the dazzle out of them, I became aware that I was not alone upon the road.

"Good morning, Mr Mort. You are taking an early constitutional—been far?"

The cheery tones were familiar to me, and taking my hand from my eyes, I saw before me Detective Smith, with half-a-dozen mounted police, barring my progress.

"Good morning; not very far," I replied to both queries, yet looking, I daresay, a little uneasy.

"A good horse that of yours, Mr Mort; is he your own?"

"No; I hired him from a shanty over there."

"Ah, I know, 'The Diggers' Rest;' that's where I got mine from. Funny that we should both take a fancy to an early ride on this particular day, isn't it?"

"I don't know, Mr Smith. Are you out on business?"

"Oh dear, no, on pleasure entirely. I've got a holiday from duty, and, meeting these friends, thought I'd like to ride along with them; I half expected to meet a friend of yours this way—Mr Walker, the digger; you didn't meet him, did you?"

I am a very bad hand at telling a direct lie, and with those keen eyes fixed full upon me, I stammered over this one.

"Ah, I was right, then, you have met him; can you take us to him, do you think?"

"No, Mr Smith, I cannot; besides, I am in rather a hurry to get back to Melbourne."

"Perhaps you can tell us how far ahead he is?"

"No, Mr Smith, I cannot."

"That's all right. Oblige me by holding out your hands this way."

Mr Smith put his wrists together, and then, producing a pair of highly-polished handcuffs from his pocket, adroitly made me a prisoner.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr Smith?" I asked in an angry tone, as soon as I had recovered from this sudden operation.

"Oh, my dear boy, what a ridiculous question to ask. You own to having just left Mr Walker—"

"No, sir, I did not."

"Well, your face did, which is the same thing; and, refusing to give us any information about him, you ask the question, what do I mean by handcuffing you,—that's a little too thin, when you know that you have just refused five hundred pounds."

"I don't understand you."

"Don't you? Then you will before you are many days older. Take your prisoner back to Carlton, Russell, and we'll ride on."

One of the police took my rein in his hand, and led me the way to Melbourne, while Mr Smith and the others, with a cheery wave of his hand, rode on rapidly.

"By-bye, Mr Mort, I'll see you before long. It's not every super who can afford to ride, or refuse five hundred pounds before breakfast."

I was not very greatly troubled over my arrest, because I had nothing upon me to incriminate me; possibly the detective considered that I had when he arrested me so promptly, but a cold sweat broke over me as I reviewed the escape I had, and as the thought crossed my mind how different it might have been if they had taken me going to meet Captain Rainbow, instead of coming from him, it was such a relief to me that I actually shivered, as if some one had been walking over my grave.

"Are you cold?" asked my guide, in a kind tone.

"Not at all," I said, recovering myself.

"We'll have a drink at 'The Diggers' Rest' as we pass," said he, gently.

After this, we rode on silently for the next hour and a half, when we came to the shanty, at the open door of which the landlord was standing, still in his shirt and trousers.

"Barney, fetch us a nobbler each," shouted the policeman, as we drew up.

"Hullo, young feller, what have you been up to with my horse; bushranging, eh?"

I did not reply, for at the moment my attention was attracted by a little fellow who sat on the ground, dressed in an old pair of trousers and a ragged shirt, and amusing himself with a solitary game of marbles. It was Dicky.

He looked up quite naturally, as if we had been perfect strangers, and then went on with his game, as the landlord appeared with the drink.

"I shall want your horse, Barney, till we get to Melbourne. Has his hire been paid for?" observed my captor.

"Yes, I saw to that; in fact, I took a deposit on him, as it was a stranger hired him out. You had better have it back again, young feller."

The landlord dropped his hand into his pocket, and drew out two sovereigns.

"There's your deposit, less the hire of the horse."

"I don't want it now; best keep it until I am free," I

replied. It seemed like taking the Queen's shilling, that money which this agent was offering to me.

"As you like, sir. What's he up for?"

"Oh, nothing much, if he has nothing on him, and can hold his tongue," replied the policeman. "Smith fancies he has been with Rainbow."

"Well, young chap, I hope for your own sake that you haven't got anything about you to give the Government a hold on you?"

I knew that the landlord was asking me a question, and that Dicky was waiting for my reply, although he didn't appear interested, so I replied easily,—

"No; I have nothing about me that I need fear to show any one."

"That's all right. Well, here's fortune to you, and a speedy release. Be sure and come for your money when you are out."

The landlord poured out a mouthful of brandy from the bottle in his hand into the glass I had drank from, and looked towards me as he swallowed it, then we once more rode on.

So my engagement as soldier, demon, ogre and male fairy at the Theatre Royal was terminated, and "the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes," as far as the ladies of the ballet and the army of supernumeraries were connected, were over. I had at last become an important item of society, and, like other *protégés* of Government, would be lodged free of expense, for a short time, at least. I should be honoured by having my name and description published, the same as if I had done some great and glorious action. I should shine as a reflector to the refulgence of Captain Rainbow.

Yet I was not comforted by this coming celebrity, for I felt like a rank impostor. I had done nothing to deserve this publicity, and I would be discovered and turned adrift before the public were half glutted. I had done nothing to deserve the treatment I was receiving—this member of the constabulary escorting me to prison with such grand importance, the crowd of idlers that met us at the outskirts of the city, and who accompanied us to the door of the prison with the same intensity of interest as if I had actually been a criminal of some importance. Even Rainbow himself could

not have had a larger convoy, or more sympathy bestowed upon him from the fair sex, as they looked at me while we rode past them, with my handsome handcuffs glistening in the morning sun.

"Poor young fellow, what's he done?"

"He's a bushranger; can't you see by his fine horse."

"Ah, it's all the good-looking chaps gets copped; what a shame, ain't it?"

In this fashion we reached the prison, my head hung down with shame, not because I was going through the streets a captive, for no one knew me, but because I felt so undeserving of all this superfluous interest and feminine pity. An impostor must always feel ashamed in his own heart when he is getting credit for what he has not done; he must be ever thinking on the hour of exposure, as I was then doing.

A curious sensation came over me as I passed through the little doorway and heard it clash behind me, leaving my horse, and the crowd outside admiring it for what it was supposed to have carried me through, the perfume of the young gum leaves seemed to come into my nostrils with that pearly dawn and dew bath. What a delicious pleasure that forest gallop had been, now that I was no longer at liberty to enjoy it.

I was taken into a room and carefully searched, and the few trifles which I had in my pockets removed, after being examined and notified, then my name, address and actions since my arrival in the colonies were carefully written down, and my photograph taken—the photograph of a rank impostor, which would likely be placed along with real criminals until they found me out and kicked me with contumely from their hospitable doors as unworthy of the trouble they had taken over me; it was a nasty reflection, which made me blush with downright shame.

They did not take my clothes from me or cut my hair, but they showed me my cell, and then put me into the exercise yard for the rest of the day.

Here I came upon Mr Macintosh and my two other friends, Tony Peters and Billy Jones. They had got over the doctor by malingering, and let off hard labour, and were now enjoying their ease as invalids.

Macintosh did not greet me in a friendly spirit, I must say, although the others made me welcome. He had always

been an uncouth animal, and wasn't improved by prison life. I fancy he had some idea that I had been the cause of his conviction, and so scowled upon me and muttered something about being "even with me" when he got out. I noticed also that the companions he consorted with in the prison yard were decidedly of the Bill Sykes order, and that there was a strong family resemblance between him and them, now that they were all cropped and shaved alike, and wore the same costumes. Sandy Macintosh looked fit for anything, from "mouching" up to murder, so long as not too much courage was required.

Tony and Billy congratulated me warmly on my promising start in life, for somehow the word had gone through the yard that I was in for bushranging. It was a manly occupation according to the jail code, and they were all proud of me in consequence. In my modesty and sense of not deserving this honour, I tried to deny it, but as denial was the fashion with them, I was not believed, but only considered wise and artful, and therefore was looked up to the more, like many another favourite of fortune who has won success by pure accident. I became a *personage* in spite of myself.

I cannot say, beyond the loss of liberty, that prison life as represented in this exercise yard was at all unpleasant to me. Of course it only represented a temporary refuge; besides, I felt as shy and awkward amongst those adepts in crime as an amateur might do amongst professionals who had mistaken him for a professor, and were honouring him under this fallacious impression.

There was a long table under a roofed-in part of the yard, with some forms for resting upon. Here we took our food—weak tea, without milk, and bread, minus butter, for breakfast, a basin of soup, with potatoes and a little beef for dinner, and the same for supper as for breakfast.

Having doctor's orders for their tobacco, a few of them were permitted to smoke, while the warders did not scrutinise too severely who had the pipes, so that they were generally passed from mouth to mouth in Indian fashion. There was a slate also placed handy, with a piece of chalk, for the use of those who liked to amuse themselves drawing or writing, with a few instructive volumes. I could see in other adjacent yards where the hard labour men were em-

ployed at stone-breaking or stone-dressing, that the amount of labour required was very little more than general exercise of their muscles ; in fact, I had not been many hours a prisoner before I had ample proofs that a convict's life was a remarkably easy and comfortable one, free from all anxiety and responsibility. They more nearly resembled monks in some peaceful retreat than anything else, and compared with my independent stone-breaking experience outside, it was Paradise set against purgatory.

"Who would not be a criminal if one could only get over a few foolish prejudices, to be cared for and petted up like this?" I thought, as I looked about me on this assemblage of happy schoolboys, with their careful servants all round, free from all anxiety, removed from all temptation, guarded from all danger, watched over day and night with the tender solicitude which only mothers are supposed to display towards their beloved offspring.

At six o'clock we were marched into our sleeping quarters, as if we had been little boys, and left to take our fill of sleep in quiet ; and even here our careful guardians watched over us to see that we were comfortable, for every hour they visited us, without disturbing us, merely flashing their lantern round the cell to see if we were all right and needed nothing, with the doctor, chaplain and governor ever at our beck and call if we required their services. Talk of first-class hotels, hydropathic establishments or homes for friendless and single gentlemen, they were not in it when compared with the benign hospitality of Carlton Prison.

Of course there were rules to be observed in this free establishment, as in all other health resorts. We were forced to get up when the five o'clock bell rang in the morning, and expected to tidy up our room a little—quite a relaxation to an orderly man—which no one could object to. We were also expected to salute our servants, as any gentleman naturally would do, when they ushered us into the exercise yard, take our baths at stated times, and behave ourselves decorously ; and beyond this the benevolent Government asked no more from us in return for their unvaried attention to our wants and *reasonable* desires.

And yet, some of the happy recipients thereof were not satisfied. Indeed, most of them longed for the one thing that they could not get—to be able to leave all this comfort, and

throw themselves once more into the tear and wear of an uncertain existence ; and to accomplish their foolish desire, they spent all their leisure time making plans to get out. This I wondered at, with the probable brief time at my disposal of enjoyment, for I was quite satisfied with my present exemption from care. Perhaps, if I had been convicted and sentenced to a long imprisonment, it might have been different.

On the second day of my retreat, I was taken before the governor, when I met Mr Smith, who had returned unsuccessful from his man-hunt, and put through a close examination ; but as I was now on my guard, I endured it calmly, and left them baffled. Then I was taken back again, and kept in my cell for three days on an ascetic diet of bread and water, which cooled my blood, and left my head clearer than ever ; again privately examined, and this time committed for trial.

After this, Mr Smith visited me in a friendly spirit, telling me that he had taken an interest in me, and as I was such a good horseman, that he would use his influence to get me into the mounted constabulary—a splendid body of men, and mostly composed of gentlemen—if I would give him my confidence, and relate all that I knew about Captain Rainbow and his accomplices. The offer was a tempting one, I must confess, but the conditions were such as I, in my foolish prejudice, could not accept, so I was forced to decline his help, and send him away a very angry and discomfited detective.

My next visitor was the lawyer whom Jessie Carew had employed to get me out of my scrape. He did not ask me any questions about Rainbow, but questioned me closely about my antecedents, and left me with the assurance that I had nothing to fear ; he would get me out without the least trouble. I knew that he would, and that was just what I dreaded most—the moment when my kind guardians would cast me adrift to starve.

It was a very tame affair that trial of mine, and soon over. My lawyer did all the speaking, and saved me the trouble of telling any more lies, so that I was ignominiously dismissed, as I had all along expected.

CHAPTER XVI.

PADDY'S MARKET.

WHEN I called at the stage door on the evening of my liberation, I was refused admission, my place had been filled up. I next inquired for Miss Jessie Carew, and discovered that she was also one of the absentees; she had taken French leave, and, as her part had not been a very important one, the management had also supplied themselves with a substitute. I turned from the theatre side door with twopence-halfpenny in my pocket, and the knowledge that four and sixpence was waiting for me on the next Monday morning, if I cared to call for it at the office.

I had gone back to Mrs Latour's, who made me welcome. I was owing a week for lodgings, but they were not very hard on their lodgers, so that I felt I had a few days before me to decide my fate.

Stringy Bark was there when I got back, and eager for news of my escapade. He had prepared a scathing article on the stupidity of the police, and only wanted a few details to make it complete, details which I likewise refused to give him, although he offered me a guinea for them.

"How is Dicky Walker getting on?" I asked, to turn the conversation.

"Dicky be done brown," cried the little larikin sub-editor irately. "He is like all colonial kids, don't know when he is well off; he has skedaddled, and left us in the lurch. The governor is in an awful funk about him, swears he would like to catch that boy, but won't take my advice and employ the police. I believe, now, that he has taken something from Hardbake that he values, for he ain't like the same man since; he has given up teetotalism, and swigs into the brandy like one o'clock; swears, too, almost as fluently as I can do myself, and don't seem to have the heart for business that he had; but the 'rag' is going on per usual for all that, thanks to 'yours truly,' with the help of a good staff of literary critics. We are strong, my boy, strong now, and are going in for the slugging of books also, as well as the immorality of trade. We represent Greater Britain, by Jove, and devilish few who get the wrong side of us are likely to escape our maul-hauling, I can tell you."

I thought sadly, as the little fellow prattled on, about James Walker and his literary friends, and wondered if Mr Hardwake had secured some of those critics upon the staff of *The Financial Diver*.

"I guess we have ruined one or two well-known authors, who think no small beer of themselves, on the other side of the herring pond; we have shown them up to our colonial readers for what they are, in spite of their mushroom reputations; won't they wriggle when they read what the Australian free press thinks about them!"

"If they read it, Stringy."

"By Jove, they must read it, for I post it to their publishers, and they will have to stop our gab if they don't want more of the same sort. We are going it, have got our agents in Grub Street; oh, we are established on a firm basis now, if the governor don't break down, or turn soft, and that ain't likely."

The next morning I put on my stone-breaking suit, and went round the different builders' workshops, seeking for a job as a labourer. I was strong enough to carry a hod, and thought that, with a little instruction, I might manage to mix up mortar to the satisfaction of the workmen.

At last, after many rejections, I was told to come on and begin work. A weary day that was with my stern taskmaster, the bricklayer, for he saw I was new to the trade, and bullied me as unmercifully as the overseer of a workhouse; at last, however, I managed to conciliate him by spending my few coppers on beer for him, and then we went on fairly pleasant for the rest of the day.

The following day I did my work better, and, I think, would have gradually settled down to my new life, but for a piece of senseless independence and folly which I gave way to, and which effectually barred my further intimacy with this noble army of representatives of manly labour.

We had finished our day's work, and were getting on our coats, when one of the workmen came over to me with a sheet of paper in his hand and the stump of a pencil.

"Well, young man, do you feel inclined to put your name down on this list?"

"What is it about?" I asked.

"Oh, only a little testimonial we are getting up to the

foreman of the works, and a subscription for an albert chain for his watch ; put your name down, with the sum you intend to bestow, and it can be deducted from your wages at the end of the week."

"But I am a stranger amongst you, and don't know the foreman yet."

"That don't matter ; we've all given something, and you are expected to do the same."

"But what has the foreman done to deserve this testimonial and token of esteem ?"

"Given us work, of course ; taken us on."

"Is he not paid, as we are, for doing this ?"

The man looked at me a little suspiciously, and shifted his feet.

"Of course he is paid."

"Higher wages than we are ?"

"Yes ; what of that ?"

"Nothing ; only, as we are expected also to work for our wages, as he is, if he hasn't done more than his duty, I don't see why we should contribute to purchase an albert chain for him, unless, of course, he has done something special to deserve it."

"Then you won't give anything ?"

"Not on these grounds," I replied quietly.

"Then, young fellow, you won't be long on this job, I can tell you."

That workman was quite a prophet in his opinion, for the next morning, when I appeared at the building, I was met by the foreman, and informed that I was not wanted any more ; so, with a day and a half's wages in my pocket, I turned once more to seek for a job.

I was not successful ; day after day I tramped the streets, to be met with such rebuffs as "No, we don't want any gentlemen in this shop ;" in spite of my corduroys, I suspect I must not have looked exactly the article required.

My money was done, and I hadn't a prospect before me, and therefore I could not stay any longer at Mr Latour's. When I told the landlord my position, I must say that he did not want to take my few things for the money I owed him. Indeed, he offered to let me stay on in the hope of something turning up, but that I could not consent to. So one night I left the Coffee Palace and took a free bed with

other waifs and strays under the iron roofing of Paddy's Market.

In dealing with myself and the other characters who chanced upon me since my arrival in Melbourne, I have omitted all mention of one companion, my little dog Gyp, for the simple reason that up to this time he had been mostly tied up in Mr Latour's backyard. I could not take him with me when I went to the theatre, or was seeking after employment; it was only now, when I had no longer even a barrel to offer him, that I removed the cord from his collar and took him with me—a change which the reasonless animal hailed with the most unqualified satisfaction. We were both now homeless, but that appeared to trouble him very little, so long as we were not parted; our chance of a meal very vague, but in this he was better off than I was, for he could always manage to find a bone of some kind, whereas I was not always so fortunate.

When we went out of the lodging-house, I purposely went dressed in my working costume; that is, flannel shirt, old coat, corduroy trousers, battered felt hat and clumsy boots. They were best suited for my present mode of existence, while my better things, the suit which Jenkins had presented me with, along with my portmanteau and pawn-tickets, I left with the landlord as security for the money I owed him.

I took Sabina's letters with me, of course. They were of no value to any one except myself, so I sewed them inside my shirt, and slightly comforted myself with their presence when Gyp and I lay down on the pavement in that open-air dormitory, which accommodated so many already of both sexes.

Why did I not go up to my old friend Jim Wood in my extremity? Well, I expect it was the last remnant of foolish pride that hung about me. I thought he had enough to do with looking after himself without being burdened with such a useless member of society as I had proved myself to be. Why did I hang about the town when I had the country before me? I don't know, only that I had grown accustomed to the pavements, and had not pluck enough to leave them.

Paddy's Market was never lonely of a night, there were so many men and women, old and young, going about "dead

broke" in Melbourne at the time. Some of the company were very disreputable, as might be supposed, many were select, as far as education and manners were concerned, broken-down gentlemen and ladies, who were too honest to steal, and without courage left for begging. It takes a lot of pluck, as I afterwards found out, to make up one's mind to whine for a crust or a copper if you have not been brought up to it. Clerks, doctors and governesses were there by the dozens, all huddled close together, all in rags and unbrushed clothes, with hair matted and faces unwashed for weeks, men and women who had once been refined and human, but who had grown accustomed to dirt, tatters and empty stomachs until they had learnt to bear passively an existence which would at one time have driven them mad to contemplate as a possibility; that is one good thing about poverty and *consumption*, they both steal on so gradually that the victims almost forget how they felt when they were comfortable and healthy.

I am not going to describe my companions at this stage in my career, although I lurked amongst them long enough to get tolerably acquainted with some of them and their histories, very romantic and interesting many of them were, however, full of tragedy past and to come all of them. Yet I have thought since that time that eternity can never become monotonous, however long it may stretch out for the partaker thereof, whether he spends it in paradise, purgatory or Hades, while he can listen to those countless narratives of the woes of humanity since the earth was peopled; that is, if the Great Father permits each soul to unveil its past, and does not suppress it as the "Little Father" does in Russia. Yet I wonder sometimes if those countless voices wailing upwards the unceasing cry, "Why was it?" will be tolerated in the Eternal Court. I listened to sufficient horrors in Paddy's Market almost to transform me into an atheist, virtue lost, hope slaughtered, faith in man and God wantonly destroyed, the same outrages which have been permitted since the world began.

I hate to take too serious a view of anything, it is not philosophical. Diogenes would not have done it; he would have retired from the swarming mass of humanity who huddled nightly in this market, he would have made himself comfortable in one of the empty apple barrels, and devoured placidly the garbage amongst which my dog Gyp

found his nightly meal. I was but an acolyte at the time, and had not yet acquired my philosophic laugh; later on I learnt to jest at the "slings and arrows of fortune," and then I was happy, but I had to get out of the city and into the open air, as Tymon and Diogenes did, before I could be a perfect philosopher.

My former habits were a great hindrance to me at this time in my progress towards the sundowner state. I abhorred rags, and liked to wash my face and hands; as long as this super-sensitiveness clung to me, I was wretched. It was only when both knees were out of my trousers, and after I had parted with my coat and boots, and the sleeves fell away from my shirt, with my buttons and braces, that I began to feel at all comfortable. When one charitable policeman gave me a piece of twine to tie round my waist as a belt, and another asked a woman for the loan of a needle and some thread, so that I might draw together my rents for decency, then I felt that I really had arrived at the stage when pride or shame of any kind were affectations. I was at last qualified for my future trade, and at last began to take a certain pride in it.

Weeks passed before this happy condition arrived, weeks during which I fasted and slunk along like a spiritless mongrel, with my dog at my heels, watching him picking up his bones with envy, my face and hands getting caked with dirt until they no longer looked dirty, only sunburnt, with my thick black hair hanging uncombed over my shoulders, and grey with dust, and my beard beginning to cover my neck. Not many would have been able to have recognised Luck Mort now, I wager.

One night I was prowling about Little Bourke Street, near the theatre side door, when I came upon Sandy Macintosh, with half a dozen of his gaol comrades. They had been let out by this time, and appeared to be flush enough of money. I don't think he would have recognised me if it hadn't been for Gyp at my heels, but he saw him, and thus guessed at me.

"That is the ——— that got me took up last time," he shouted, pointing me out to his friends.

"Well, mate, go for him, and we'll keep the cops off till you settle his hash," the rest replied, getting round us.

I hadn't eaten anything for two days, and then only a bit

of bread, so that I didn't feel much up to fighting form, as I placed my back against a doorway, and braced up for my well-fed enemy ; but I saw that it had to be, for the hour was late, and the part not one likely to be visited by patrols.

I did not fight well, I must say, on this occasion, for he knocked me down twice, while my weak blows hardly touched him. All the time Gyp rushed about his ankles and bit him. The other ruffians stood round encouraging him on.

I was getting the worst of it decidedly, and began to feel dazed and faint, when all at once the door behind me was drawn back, and a woman pulled me inside.

"Good Heavens! is that you, Luck Mort?"

I laughed in an idiotic fashion at the question, as I fell on the floor,—it was Miss Jessie Carew.

"He is starving—oh, the brutes, let me at them!"

In a moment Jessie dashed out of the door at my assailants, and tackled them in a proper scientific way. The gaol-birds must have known her, for they shrank back and left Macintosh to her tender mercies, and as I lay and listened, I heard such a rattling of fists on fat flesh that I almost pitied the animal ; then she re-entered, flushed and victorious.

"I've left them to cart him off. He won't see daylight this week, I bet," exclaimed Jessie, as she exhibited her raw knuckles to the company. "My poor Luck, what have you been up to ; why didn't you go to the Diggers' Rest after you had found us gone?"

"Because I didn't think of it," I replied.

"Have something to eat and drink, old chap," cried Jessie impulsively, as she hurried about and brought cold meat and brandy to me. I ate ravenously, for it was a good while since I had tasted a square meal, while Jessie watched me with a sympathetic face.

"You've had enough of Melbourne, haven't you, by this time?"

"Yes, nearly enough," I replied.

"And you'll go to Jim, won't you?" asked Jessie tenderly.

I looked at her pretty face and thought, "Is it worth while starving as a vagabond any longer ; would imprisonment be half as bad, would hanging be much worse?"

The unaccustomed drink had got into my head, already

dazed with the blows which Sandy Macintosh had given to me. I felt stupid and dull. A picture of old England floated before me, and shut out that fresh fair face so close to mine,—my uncle as he was to me in the olden times, the domains that I once considered to be my own. I was once more back and listening to the farewell words of our family lawyer, Mr Sampson, "Keep your record as clean as possible, as I know you will, Lucknow."

With these words sounding in my ears, I struggled up from the chair on which Jessie Carew had set me, and pushing her out of my road, blindly staggered from the house, without answering her, and made my way back to Paddy's Market.

CHAPTER XVII.

ANOTHER OFFER OF MARRIAGE DECLINED.

WHEN I look back upon those Melbourne days of short commons and well-ventilated costume, it does not appear as if I suffered a great deal in the way of privation, excepting at the first, before hunger broke down the last reserves, and to *ask* for my daily bread became an easy task. It seems astonishing, looking back, of course, how many things turned up in the course of the day. Perhaps I confound and blend together days now in this space, for time was not much of an object to me, so that what I now calculate to have been crowded into one day may have been spread, like boarding-school butter, thinly over a week or so. Who knows, and I dare say who cares to know, whether the sundowner tightens or slackens his waist-belt before he lies down to sleep?

Sometimes it was a horse to hold, or some traps to carry from the station to a hotel; sometimes a half day when they were short-handed at the wharfs, or a cart to unload, for which I got a glass of beer and a bit of bread and cheese. Often I lay on my back all day on the banks of the Yara-Yara, with Gyp also doing the *dolce far niente*, waiting for night to come, when I might prowl outside the theatre or public-house doors, looking for cigar stumps, which, when I found, I used to chew and swallow to kill the gnawing pain inside. Cigar stumps are a first-class narcotic for keeping back hunger, when you can get them;

but there is a great demand for them amongst tramps, so that I wasn't always successful, and therefore had, as I have said, to tighten my waist-string remarkably tight at times.

I kept a sharp look-out during my prowlings for faces that I had known, so that I might avoid them, although I was fairly well disguised with my thick mask of dirt, my beard and my rags. Yet Jessie Carew and Sandy Macintosh had recognised me, and so might the others; therefore I took care, whenever I saw any of them, to give them a wide berth, and keep my follower Gyp out of sight.

What a fund of amusement Gyp was during this time! Necessity was the one law which he, dog-like, recognised outside the ruling motive of his life, Fidelity.

I have described him already. Black-and-tan, with the sturdy legs which betrayed his fox-terrier blood, a longish tail with the end nipped off, drooping ears, and the numerous wrinkles in his neck which made him so old looking in spite of his youth. Rather leary and crafty eyes, I must say he had, yet affectionate when they fixed their warm light on one.

And he was artful, if ever little dog was, and could have been taught any tricks if I had taken ordinary pains over his education. I was too indolent to do this, so that he had to pick up what education he knew for himself—like his grub.

He was powerfully chested, and I think fared better as a vagabond than he had done while under the restraints of respectability, for, being unprincipled, he stole constantly; and while I stood at the door humbly begging, he would impudently dart inside, and help himself to whatever was handiest and quickest got at. He made regular calls at the butchers, and seldom came out without carrying his order with him, so that, while I became thinner, the little scoundrel grew fatter and sleeker than he had ever been in his life before.

He was a socially-inclined fellow also, and forced his friendship on every dog he met; so that, what with turning aside to gossip every other moment with some male acquaintance, or rakishly stopping to kiss every female quadruped he met, or inquisitively running into every open door he passed, his time was fully occupied all the day.

Cats he used at one time to have a delight in chasing and

snapping, but somehow, since he became an outcast, he conquered that sportive inclination, and would only regard them dreamily. Possibly he felt intuitively that I could not afford him this luxury, and he did not wish to get me into extra trouble. At least this is how I read his sudden restraint, for no one can see quicker than a dog whether his master is an important personage or only a tolerated nuisance, and so they trim their sails accordingly.

That he thoroughly enjoyed his vagabond existence I could see every moment of the day, also, that he was an incorrigible humourist. He was always grinning over some funny recollection, and never laughed so broadly as when he had escaped the butcher's knife, and succeeded in carrying away some tit-bit. He must have known that it was wrong, I suppose, for he enjoyed it so heartily.

Gyp was a great comfort to me during these hard-up days. While I lay on my back blinking at the sun, and he rolled over me, showing his teeth in that sly, long smile of his, with the crafty wrinkles of his neck intensified, and the whites of his eyes showing, he seemed to be saying,—

“Isn't this a devilish sight better than respectability and a rope round one's neck. What is a barrel of straw and a scraggy bone in a close backyard compared to the like of this?”

If I didn't quite agree with his sentiments, at least it was a comfort to think that he was content, and never grumbled at his lot in life, or felt in the least degree abashed.

One evil tendency he had which I could never break him from, and that was his habit of visiting and trying to lure me inside bars. He would not pass a public-house, nor would he act as he did at other shops or private houses, go in by himself, but he would linger at the door, and look back at me with a diabolical and persuasive glance, while his leary, brown eyes said, as plainly as ever eyes spoke, “Are you not coming in also?” When he saw that I was not, he would come out again, and, catching hold of my tattered trousers with his teeth, try his hardest to draw me inside. I never should have thought that any dog could so far forget his dignity as that Gyp did in becoming a publican's tout. If I had been possessed of a sixpence, I believe he'd have lured me in to spend it. As it was, to get rid of his impor-

tunity, and escape the laughter of the bystanders, I was often forced into accepting a glass from some loungeur who saw his artifices, and could read at a glance my reasons for resisting. I have often wondered if advocates of temperance who rave about the superior quadruped could have seen the abominable wiles of that reprobate Gyp, and how constantly he tried to lower my independence and tempt me to drink, either at my own or some one else's expense, what they would have said.

One drizzling night I was crawling along Spring Street, with my waistband drawn particularly tight, for it must have been days since I last tasted anything stronger or more solid than water, and cigar stumps were at a sad discount. I was wet through, and had been most of the day; so that existence did not look rosy to me, and, although Gyp was so replete that he had been burying old bones more than once before darkness set in, yet he mouched after me with drooping tail, and as miserable an expression as if he also had been fasting for his sins; possibly out of sympathy with me, for it could not have been on his own account, the shameless impostor that he was.

I had seen Stringy Bark that night, but I had avoided him and his fair companion. I had also come upon Sandy Macintosh, and knew that he had not only recognised me, but was following me like a shark, and waiting on his chance to attack me. I felt it was useless to attempt to shake him off, for I had hardly stamina left to walk, far less run. Besides, I was aching so all over with rheumatic pains, that I didn't much care when he caught me, and gave me a hammering.

I was just thinking that a little outside kicking about might give definiteness to this indefinite and dreary ache, when I got to a deserted portion of the street, and I knew that my time had come.

"At last I have got you, you miserable hound," he snarled, as he laid his over-fed and drink-swollen hand upon me.

"Yes, cad, you have got me at last," I answered with a faint laugh, as he began.

I didn't attempt to strike back or ward off the blows; I couldn't—indeed, I hardly felt them. I could see Gyp was doing his best to defend me, in spite of the brutal kicks he received from those heavy boots, which took him and me

alternately. Then I became sleepy, and, sinking down upon the wet pavement, lost all sensation with the first kick he delivered full upon my skull.

I suppose he must have amused himself, for some little time after this, with my ribs and other portions of my anatomy, until scared by the policeman; for, when I awoke, I could no longer grumble at *vague* pains; my rheumatics were completely gone, and only sharp aches and bruises remained. A capital doctor that Sandy Macintosh had proved himself to be, if a little heroic in his treatment of his patient.

As I opened my eyes, I was blinded by the flash of the policeman's lamp, but I heard a voice saying,—

"He is coming round now, sir. You can leave him to me. He is a friend of mine."

I looked again to see this phenomenon—a friend of Luck Mort's—and took in a small, thin figure, clad in a drenched and ragged underskirt and a much-worn bodice. Yes, such a one might claim friendship with me, if any one could.

"Very well, my girl, if you claim him, I'll leave him with you; only you had best let me take him to the hospital, for he has got a regular smashing."

"Oh, no; he'll be all right. I'll look after him."

The policeman closed his lamp and walked off. I could feel Gyp licking my face diligently, while this unknown friend held my head on her wet petticoat, and I could hear her words as she said,—

"Oh, Luck, Luck, have you come to this?"

"You appear to know me. Who are you?" I muttered, for I still felt dazed, although my senses were returning quickly.

"Don't you know me, old boy? Your old friend, Elsie Kemp?"

I knew her now. I had often wondered where she had gone to, for I had not seen her for weeks about the streets, and when I had, I generally avoided her as I did everyone else, that being one of my obstinate weaknesses.

With an effort I managed to get on my feet, she helping me up and placing me against the wall to steady me, then I looked at her quietly for a moment or two, while I gathered together my wandering faculties.

There was a lamp-post not far off, so that I could notice details. Last time I had seen Elsie Kemp, she wore a

mauve silk dress with lace trimmings, some soft snowy material of fur had been round her neck, and a bonnet, Paris made, and decorated with forget-me-nots, perched on her golden brown curls.

This night she was hatless and bootless, with her hair draggled and uncombed, her features pinched and not over clean; the one skirt she wore had originally been black, but it was ragged and rusty through lying on outside, and the garment which covered her upper portion, and which was pinned high up at the neck, must have been worn for some time, for the trimming was all torn from it, and it looked nearly as dingy as her skirt. Things had not gone well with her lately, any more than with me. We were a proper pair of tramps, and no mistake.

I burst out laughing, as I saw the poor girl shivering under my regard, while I cast my eyes over my own rags. What else could a fellow do who was starving and feeling as if he had just been loosed from the rack, unless there had been a river handy, where I could have gripped her up and flung us both into it, loathsome objects as we were.

She understood my laugh, for she sprang towards me and kissed me savagely on the mouth, while I caught her to my bruised ribs with a gasp, and tried to warm her.

"Come, Luck, let's have a drink."

"I haven't a copper; haven't had one for a week past."

"I've got a shilling somewhere about my pocket; come."

She put her thin arm round me and led me into a public-house not far off, where she spent sixpence of that shilling in rum, and the rest in bread and cold meat.

What a beastly thing Nature is. I drank down my share of that rum, and devoured more than my share of the provisions, without a thought, until it was finished; then, as I looked at the wreck of my old shipmate, I felt that I had at last taken the Queen's shilling.

"Where to now, Elsie?" I said, as we left the public-house.

"I have nowhere to go. I slept last night on the wharfs," answered my companion softly.

"Then come with me to Paddy's Market; that's my diggings."

My bones were too hard, or else Sandy Macintosh had been interrupted too soon over his punishment, for there was nothing seriously damaged about me. So together we struggled up the almost deserted streets, and found our way to my friendly shelter.

Next morning, at daybreak, when we were expected to move on, I took up the conversation where I had left it off the night before.

"Well, Elsie, I have nothing to offer you; but I am going to leave Melbourne this morning. Will you come with me into the country, and I'll try for a job there, and as soon as I can save enough I'll marry you."

"Oh, Luck Mort! what are you talking about? Do you think I'd ever marry *you*?"

"Well, I'm not much of a catch for any woman, I will admit," I answered, looking down at my tatters. "But who knows, I may get something to do, even in this accursed colony."

"Luck Mort, listen to me. I wouldn't marry you though you had thousands at your back. I tell you I'd rather punish any man than marry you."

"But, Elsie, have you taken me into consideration? You saved my life last night. You spent a shilling on me—"

"Stop, Luck; never mind that shilling. I'll take it back from you again with interest. We are chums, dash it, man! When you have it, I'll let you set me up in a house of my own, and never feel a bit of obligation about it, there; but to marry you, or even take more than a kiss from you, as you gave me last night—no, brother, I'd kill myself first!"

"Will you come with me?"

"Yes; I'll see you free of the town, for I think the country air will be best for both of us. I tell you what, old boy, you have done me good, and made me almost forget that orator. Where are you going to, Luck?"

"I don't know. There's only one road out of Melbourne which I have been before, and I think I'll take that one."

It is impossible to tell any one who cannot comprehend it for themselves, why I asked Elsie Kemp to marry me; also, why she refused the offer. Our motives were the same, and we understood each other perfectly.

Together we walked out of the city before the shops were open, and it was only when I got to the Diggers' Rest that I remembered the landlord, and his generous offer on the day of my capture. What I could not take then for myself I might ask now, after my acceptance of Elsie's shilling, for her.

"Come in with me here, Elsie," I said, and together we went inside. "Well, landlord, do you remember me?" I asked, as I looked at him.

The landlord looked me over slowly, and then he said,—

"Yes, young fellow; it isn't many as I forget. Why didn't you come for your money when you got out o' quod?"

"I did not want it then."

"But you want it now, eh?"

"Yes; I want to borrow it from you, if you will lend it to me."

"I have it ready for you, and five more if you like—more than that if you need it. The captain left word that I was to give you whatever you wanted."

I thought a moment, and then turned to Elsie.

"You cannot go anywhere as you are, Elsie. How much would you require to set you up, so that you might apply for a situation?"

"Three pounds would do," answered Elsie.

"Then, landlord, I'll take six, if you don't mind."

"Here you are, sonny."

The landlord took out six sovereigns from his till, and handed them to me over the counter.

"We're all obliged to you for the good turn you did us, and we ain't mean about paying them as can keep their mouths shut at the right time. Seen the captain lately?"

"No."

"He was this way last night. A big job on the other side of Melbourne. You'll hear about it by-and-by. He was asking after you. Is she right?"

The landlord had been speaking in a low tone, and now pointed over to Elsie, as she sat at the table.

"Yes," I replied; "she can be depended upon."

"I thought so, from her looks. You'll have breakfast before you go on, won't you?"

I certainly wanted breakfast badly, and so did Elsie, so I replied that we would; then the landlord left us to hurry it on.

I was glad that Elsie made no great objections to the money I forced upon her. I gave her the six sovereigns, for, whatever my own wants were, I did not intend to use any of it myself, and silenced her by saying that I was now amply provided.

"What are you going to do now?" I asked her while we waited.

"I am going to turn over a new leaf, Luck, after this. I intend to go into the Home for a bit, and tell them my story from beginning to end, and leave it to them to give me a new start."

"That's right, Elsie. Then Sandy Macintosh did more good than he thought when he gave me that slogging last night, and I forgive him."

The landlord spread before us a lavish breakfast, to which we did full justice, so that, when I rose to call him aside, I felt a new man. I wanted him to credit me for the breakfast, but he said it was all in the bargain. Then, with a farewell drink, we parted, I with the feeling that even road agents were not bad fellows after all.

I saw Elsie to the turn of the road back again, and then I turned from her, and began my tramp with a more hopeful heart than I had carried for many along day.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GENUINE ARTICLE.

BEFORE I had fallen in with Elsie Kemp, I had no thought about leaving Melbourne, any more than I had of making any one an offer of my hand. Both resolutions came upon me the moment I had satisfied my hunger at her expense. I liked the girl very greatly, and pitied her for her unmerited misfortunes, and most certainly would have made her my wife—having bartered away my freedom, like Esau, for that

mess of pottage. Whether I should have been happier with her than I would have been with Lydia Crimp, is a question I am not at all prepared now to answer.

I felt glad that she had refused me, also that I had been able, even by shifting the burden from one shoulder to the other, to repay her somewhat for what she had done; although, of course, I felt that I should never get the taste of that supper out of my mouth. It would keep me humble all the days of my life; humble, as well as grateful to every sister in misfortune of my sister, Elsie Kemp.

I was trudging along, both my bare feet now pretty case-hardened, thinking upon this, when all at once I heard a loud "Hallo!" behind me, and, on looking back, beheld another pedestrian coming my way, and hailing me to stop, until he could join me.

He was a strangely-got-up fellow this, who was hurrying towards me—a young fellow who had evidently been on the booze the night before, for his face was flushed, and his eyes were like boiled lobsters. On his head was perched a woman's old straw bonnet, without ribbons or strings; like myself he was bootless, and although his shirt and trousers were not quite so ragged and patched, there was not much to choose between us.

He came on at a swinging pace, shouting out a song, and as happy-looking and lively as if no such thing as hot coppers existed, nor dry throats.

"Well, chum, on the tramp like myself, I see," he cried heartily, as he reached me.

"Yes, that is my present occupation."

"Got any tin?"

"Not a rap."

"This is my lot." He spun half-a-crown into the air, and caught it dexterously as it fell. "Landed in Melbourne last night for a spree, with forty pounds in my pocket; had my spree, picked up a nice girl, took her to the theatre, and got as drunk as a lord. Nice girl robbed me of everything, then flung me an old bonnet—this one—and, by Jove, showed her generosity by chucking me out this half-crown, and half-a-dozen coppers to drink her health with. Not a bad sort that Melbourne girl was. She knew a chap would be thirsty after his spree. Must try and hunt her up next pay-day comes."

"Are you quite content with your spree?"

"Rather! What do you think? It ain't likely that a fine-looking girl is going to look after a boosy bushman for nothing, is it? I'd say not. Why, she's a proper sort, she is, and no gammon—kind-hearted, too, by Jove. Most girls would have kicked me out, and never thought about the head-gear and that lush money. It was thoughtful of the lady, I can tell you—downright thoughtful."

"Are you going far?"

"Only the length of Killmore and a little over. I belong to a station over there, stockrider, and once more back to work for another six months. Are you going far?"

"I don't exactly know how far; until I pick up something to do, I suppose."

"What are you?"

"Nothing, but ready to do anything."

"Oh, you'll get something to do, most likely, before long. Meantime, let's get on together; two are better than one on a long road."

He was a lively companion, this stockrider, and kept on rattling out stories, and snatches of song at intervals, so that the miles passed almost unnoticed. At noon we drew up at a roadside shanty, where he asked me to join him in a glass of beer.

"We may as well spin it out as long as possible, and share alike while it lasts."

I should rather have had a glass of water, for the sun was now blazing above us, but that we found the water as expensive as the beer, so we decided to take that.

"Two pints of 'swanky,' landlord," shouted my comrade, and he got eighteenpence as change—the "swanky" was sixpence per pint at this wayside inn.

It is not a good drink, this colonial beer, for a hot day, and it varies according to the retailer's ideas of his customer's tastes. My present pint was a mixture of bitter and salt, which left me ten times thirstier than before, and so heady that I felt stupefied after I had finished it.

"Strong swanky that, boss," remarked the stockrider.

"Yes; my customers like it powerful and tasty," growled the landlord, who was not very affable to his seedy-looking patrons.

"Got anything to eat?"

"No!"

We went out after this, and, going about half a mile farther on, felt so dazed and helpless with that wonderful condiment that we both sought the shady side of a gum tree, and fell fast asleep.

It was night when we woke up again, therefore we decided to stay where we were till next morning, so once more we composed ourselves under that gum tree, and dosed off until daybreak.

"That infernal 'swanky' has left me as dry as a lime kiln," cried out my companion. "Let's go on and hunt up something to eat and drink."

After a mile or two we passed a small shed near the roadside, where we saw a girl milking a cow. The stockrider hailed her, and asked if she could sell us some milk, upon which the girl nodded, and leaping the fence we made our way to her.

"How much is it, miss?" asked my new friend.

"Sixpence a mug."

"Well, give us a mug apiece."

The girl brought out a very small mug, which held about a West-end teacupful, and gave it to my friend, who drained it at a gulp.

"Got anything to eat?"

"No."

"Then we must make our breakfast off milk, I suppose. Fill up again, and I'll tell you when to stop."

The girl measured out, and we drank about a dozen measures each before we were satisfied. I had no idea that the little pannikin she gave us represented sixpence each time it was filled, until the stockrider said,—

"That'll do; how much?"

"Twelve and sixpence."

He pulled out his whole money—eighteenpence—and placing it in her hand, said,—

"That's all we've got, my dear, to-day. I'll settle the next time I pass."

I expected that the girl would grumble and let us go, but she did nothing of the kind; she raised her voice to its full pitch, and shrieked,—

"Tom, Jack, George, here's two blooming sundowners trying to swindle me,"

"Let's be moving, mate," observed my companion ; but that was not so easy, for she had sprang forward, clutching us with each hand, and letting the silver roll to her feet.

"Quick, boys, and bring your pitchforks, or they'll be off."

We were off even as she spoke. I left a considerable portion of my tattered shirt in her hand as security for our expensive breakfast, while the stockrider managed to shake himself free, and so, making a rush, we got over the fence just as her protectors showed themselves round the shed.

It was a run after this, with three pitchfork-armed and furious selectors behind us, for over a mile, and the milk churning all the while in our insides ; but at last we left them behind, and sank down exhausted on the grass to cool ourselves.

"The little vixen, she's meaner than get out, not to trust an honest chap."

"But wasn't it an exorbitant price to ask for little over a quart of milk?"

"Oh, they charge just what they like when you particularly want an article in the bush. I don't grudge the price one bit, if I had it ; but she might have trusted us a little more."

"I don't think a regular sundowner would have easy lines on this track," I said, when he quickly took me up.

"That's just where you are wrong. A sundowner would thrive where you and I would starve ; of course he wouldn't expect milk fresh drawn from the cow, but he'd get skim milk, which would be more wholesome for him. It was our darned cheek brought the pitchforks on us. Now, wait until you meet a real *bona-fide* professional sundowner, and you'll see a man who could wheedle a sixpence almost out of a parson's own private funds, and that is what few could manage to do in the way of soft soap in this world. We are sure to drop across one of them gentry shortly ; they don't travel very fast."

We had not covered, as yet, much ground ourselves, what with that "swanky," the heat of the sun, and our blistered feet—for my companion, accustomed to boots, felt the loss of them severely, and the rough roads punished me also after the smooth streets of the city. It is curious how

a rustic will get dead beat after a short walk along the pavements, and a city man, who can walk the asphalt all day long without feeling it, will cave in with an hour of the lanes and fields.

The rain which had fallen over Melbourne had not apparently favoured the country as yet, for everywhere the earth appeared to be burnt up, and the grass like stale hay. What had appeared as mother-of-pearl tints in that early dawn now looked bleached and grey, like the face of a corpse, while about us the forenoon sun blazed upon the baking ground, which was rent with cracks and seamed with waggon ruts half filled with fine dust, into which we tripped, raising it about us in smoke-like clouds, until we were covered like millers and almost choked.

We passed one or two huts, and tried them for water, but it was far too scarce a luxury to spare. At one yard we were fortunate enough to be able to scrape up a little damp mud from a hoof-mark, and this we were glad to suck for the moisture it contained. At another part we gathered a few young gum leaves and chewed them, but before very long I began to feel that I could almost have committed robbery with violence, for a flask of water.

Thus we floundered on until about three o'clock in the afternoon, doing little more than a mile or so an hour, when we came to a part where the trees grew closer, and cast a grateful shadow under their trunks. Here we saw the individual my companion had been speaking about—the veritable sundowner, taking his ease, while he waited upon the cool of the day.

There could be no mistake about this being the real article. His swag was there, placed under his head as a pillow, and unopened—he being too indolent to take that trouble; his wallet was by his side, within easy reach of his hand, and well filled; his billy of cold tea was also conveniently placed, so that he could take it up without disturbing himself, while he lay with his face turned skyward, lazily wafting from his lips thin wreaths of tobacco smoke from his well-toned cutty pipe.

The clothes also were a study—boots which had not been brushed since they had been *borrowed*, fastened together with knotted pieces of twine, trousers a picture of patches of all shades, an under flannel shirt open at the neck and

shoulders, and the grey billycock hat which was immortal.

A muscular gentleman he was, but going to flesh, with massive arms, and the neck and chest of a bullock, burnt to the shade of well-matured magogany, and well covered with hair, beard and tresses almost patriarchal; a fine Roman nose stood above the bushy moustache, and thick, good-natured, sensual lips under it, thick eyebrows shading bright blue eyes, redolent of lusty health and animal contentment, with a large bronzed face showing from the forest of tangled hair the placidity and reflectiveness of a Jove, with no Juno to trouble him—Jove taking his ease in Arcadia, with Juno in distant Olympia, and Ixion fast bound to his wheel in lower Hades.

He did not trouble himself to move as we approached, but looked at us placidly along his sun-ripened nose. There was nothing to be made out of us by wheedling or whining, and he did not grudge us a share of his arbour.

"Got anything to drink?" asked the stockrider, on which the sundowner pointed with his pipe towards his billy, without speaking.

Taking this as permission, we each quenched our thirst moderately.

"Any grub?"

The sundowner kicked his well-filled wallet towards us, upon which we fell to, and satisfied our hunger.

"Now, if you don't mind, I'll take a puff at your pipe."

"Fill it, then," answered this placid god, as he stretched out the nearly empty pipe with one hand, while with the other he held out a plug of tobacco, flint, steel and touch-paper; then, having relieved his hands, he placed them clasped under his head, and closed his eyes.

"There's a life for you that any one might envy," observed my companion, when a light snore or two proclaimed our host safe in dreamland.

"He's a lily, he is; neither toils nor spins, and yet the country provides for him, while you and I may starve. I could bet you anything he had his supper, bed and breakfast from those very farmers who chased us with their pitchforks this morning. Not last night, for he never walked so far in one day, but the night before: five miles a day is his longest stretch. He'll sleep on now till the

sun gets near the plain, and by that same token there ought to be a good place for grub and sleeping quarters not more than a mile off, or he wouldn't be waiting here. We'll know when he rouses up, so let's follow suit until sundown."

I was satisfied with this arrangement, for I felt tired out, not so much with the walking as with the after effects of that smashing which I had received. My body was now one complete harmony of pain which prevented me not only from sleeping, but even from lying long in one position; besides, time was no more an object to me than it appeared to be to the happy sundowner.

About six o'clock he began to show signs of animation—a stretching out of his burly limbs, then an enormous yawn or two which woke the stockrider, and finally he managed to hoist himself to his feet, and look at us with a little more attention than he had before condescended to do.

"Ah, mates, you're not in my line of business yet exactly, but you're coming to it; where's your swags?"

"We haven't got any."

"Lost your swags, and your billies, and your boots! How the devil are you going to persuade people that you're honest diggers, if you haven't got any tools to show?"

"We can't persuade them, that's why we have come to you."

"Humph! Gone far to-day?"

"About twelve miles or so."

"And d'you think you're likely to get on, raking the country like that? Why, you'd use up Victoria in a couple of months at that rate; d'you know how long it has taken me to travel up this length from Melbourne?"

"Can't guess; three weeks, perhaps."

"No, that would be overdoing it; it isn't enough populated for that time. I've only been six days on this line; six more will land me at Killmore."

"How far are you going to-night?"

"To 'The Rose in Bloom,' a mile and a half farther on; they say the landlord is a benevolent man, that he has been a digger himself, and has a soft place in his heart for diggers out of luck, like myself."

"Then; perhaps he'll show some charity towards us also."

"Perhaps, but don't count upon it; with no boots and no swag, it looks reckless-like and low, and no respectable man

can stand to encourage these sort of customers. Let me go in first, and then, if I see a good chance, I'll speak a word for you."

Having agreed to this arrangement, our patron picked up his swag, and, swinging it over his shoulder, with his billy, now empty, in one hand, and a branch of gum-tree in the other, he started off between us at a leisurely pace.

"There's no use going too fast; the time to land in at 'The Rose in Bloom' is just when supper is set up, and the sky is getting green, that will be eight o'clock; if we drop on them before, they'll expect us to go on farther, while, if we land any later, we'll lose our supper."

He spoke fluently enough, and fairly correctly, this philosophic guide of ours, now that he had roused up for the day, so that I was tempted to put a few questions to him.

"Have you been long a traveller?"

"Yes; I have been doing Victoria for the past twenty years, and I expect it will last me for the next thirty, if I live so long."

"I suppose you have been over it all?"

"Over Victoria in twenty years! Young man, do you know the extent of this colony, that you ask such a question?"

"Not exactly," I replied, laughing.

"I thought not, indeed," went on the sundowner solemnly.

"According to the latest computation, the area of Victoria is 88,198 square miles, and during the past twenty years I reckon I have covered 30,000 square miles, for I never take the same road twice, which means 1,500 miles per year, which is a little over four square miles per day, which does not to me seem, on an average, bad walking for a man to do continuously, particularly a delicate man like me."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE ORIGINAL SUNDOWNER EXPLAINS HIS SYSTEM.

OUR guide paused for a moment to allow us to digest the imposing number of square miles which he had covered during the last twenty years of his existence. He was an

adept at calculation, I must say, and seemed to have studied the geography of Victoria pretty closely, with its statistics as far as good quarters were concerned.

"Extraordinary perseverance, by Jingo!" observed the stockrider. "Beats the Wandering Jew all to sticks."

"Perseverance is a quality I pride myself upon, particularly since I arrived in this colony, and in a manner settled down, if you can call tramping about the country settling down."

"As you do it, I would call it that," retorted the stockrider facetiously, an outburst of frivolity that the other ignored, as he continued with his reflections.

"Before that time, in the days of my foolish youth, I own that I was a bit unsteady and impulsive, as fiery-blooded boys mostly are."

"Ah, tell us about the 'before that,' the fiery-blooded days of boyhood, you know. That's what interests us as young bucks, and we've lots of time before we get to the 'Rose in Bloom,' at the rate we are marching along, for a regular, heart-raking, three-volume romance to be reeled off."

"Before that, I was jumpy and reckless; in fact, through my want of taking things steady, I laid the seeds of the trouble that bothers me now."

"What is your particular trouble?"

"Weakness, my lads, weakness of the back and joints. I soon get knocked up; I can't stand much fatigue. Now, this mile and a half is more than I reckoned upon, with the three miles I had this morning. The consequence will be that I'll be regularly on my beam-ends by the time we get there, and will have to make up for it somehow to-morrow."

"Got out of your reckoning a bit, eh?"

"No, I'm always right there; only sometimes, you see, selectors don't build so near to each other as they ought to do. By-and-by the colonies will be improved, but as yet a traveller must take his resting-places as he finds them."

The sundowner gazed pathetically at the long stretch of dry dust before us, and then at the sky, now glowing with the sunset colours, before he resumed.

"To begin with my father, as a man always ought to do, if he can. He was a chapel minister, with a nice comfortable living, in an easy country village, so that he hadn't much to do except look after his grapes and cucumbers. When

I had grown up, and he considered that I had assisted him long enough in this arduous occupation, he sent me to school—that is, he sent me, much against my inclination, to a number of schools before he finally gave it up as a bad job. The excitement of learning the rudiments was too much for my poor head, to say nothing about the punishments inflicted on my delicate body by each of the brutal masters before they finally sent me home. Only one thing I was good at—arithmetic—and that seemed to come by instinct. My father was a splendid man at ready reckoning—most parsons are when it is to be cash received—and I inherited the gift. Geography I have mastered in a limited way since, with perseverance, but the other came natural, and I could calculate, even before I learnt my alphabet, almost as well as my father, how much was in the collection-plate by the time it reached me. When he found out that there was no use sending me any more to school, and that I would never make a pastor, he bound me over to a surveyor, thinking that my adaptability in figures might come in handy in the profession of measurement. So it might have been, only that early rising always made me sick, and sitting at a desk nearly broke my back. Thus it came to pass that the surveyor sent me home one day with a line, saying that he considered me too delicate for work of any sort, and strongly advised my father to keep me at home under his own eye, where I might be more useful, which he did.”

“Where did the fiery impulsiveness come in, chum?” here asked the stockrider.

“I am just coming to it, if you will give me time. I was not always lying on the lawn, you may depend. Sometimes I used to go down to the village, and spoon the girls there—in fact, got into no end of trouble about them—and it was this amorous tendency which made me leave home, much against my wish. One time we had a young lady staying with us for her health. She was rather delicate, so her people thought the country air would do her good. I got on fairly well with this young lady up to a point. She would laugh at me, and go about with me—in fact, sometimes she forced me to go about with her too much when I was dead tired. But she was mighty prudish, and always kept me at arm’s-length when I was getting too spoony on

her, and devilish pretty as well. So one evening, after an extra glass of father's genuine port, I thought to play a bold coup, and get her in spite of herself; so what do you think I did?"

"I don't know," replied the stockrider shortly.

"I just slipped into her room before she retired, and hid myself, where I waited patiently until she had locked herself in. Then I popped out, thinking that she'd be quiet for her own sake when she saw who it was."

"And was she?"

"Devil a bit; she screeched out like blue murder, until she had raised the house and forced me to jump the window—ten feet if it was an inch, before the cucumber frame broke my fall, and cut me awful. How is that for impulsiveness, eh, chums?"

The stockrider whistled the first bar of *A che la mort* in a soft way as reply.

"There was a racket, and no mistake, when it all came out, for she was a revengeful little spitfire, so much of it that my father had to pay my passage out to Australia, and smuggle me on board, with a ten-pound note as my last legacy from him. He didn't want to see or hear any more about me, and he never did from me."

"I'd say not after that, with your other weaknesses combined. Did you drink much in those days, mate?"

"No; that was never a vice of mine," replied the sun-downer.

"That was a blessing; go on."

"I soon spent that ten pounds, for I couldn't get a job to suit me, but I used to attend church regularly; that is, evening service."

"Why evening service more than morning?"

"For one thing, as I told you, I was a late riser, so that I never could get up in time; for the other, I generally managed to make enough at the evening service to keep me going half the week."

"You don't mean to say you officiated?"

"Yes, but not in the way you mean. I had learnt one piece of smartness at my father's church, and that was to help myself to the plate when it went round. It was the old Scripture verse applied to personal uses, 'Lend to the poor, and you give to the Lord.' Ha! ha!"

"Yes ; only don't laugh, man, it sounds ugly ; and how did you manage it?"

"I used to wait until the church was nearly filled, and then I took my seat near the door ; there I would wait until the plate came round. As it passed along the seat in front, I could see what was in it, and where the gold lay. If it was a sovereign, I put in a shilling, and made nineteen ; if a half-sovereign, I put in sixpence, and made nine-and-sixpence in this way. I had a system of laying my silver in modestly with my second finger and thumb until I came close to the gold, then I fillipped it down with a smart ring, as if I was nervous at the last, and with my forefinger and thumb whipped up the sovereign instead. It is easily done, and almost safe after a little practice, for no one suspects a devout young man in church, and the collectors thought my shilling had covered the gold piece until they were counting up, and often then they thought they must have been mistaken."

"Did you carry on that game long?"

"Not very ; I grew too ambitious, and so was caught. Often charitable members put in paper money sealed up in envelopes, especially when it was a mission service ; so after a while I thought to provide myself with a blank envelope, and do with that instead of the shilling, and that ruined me, for I wasn't quite quick enough. One week-night service I attended a large missionary meeting with my envelope, for I knew there would be a haul that night, and so there was ; by the time the plate came round to me it was bulging full of sealed money. The missionary was leaning over his desk at the time, with his hands over his eyes, praying silently, while the harmonium was giving out soft and soothing music. I made the transfer all right as I supposed, and was holding my head down on one hand, also praying, with the sealed-up bank-note in my other hand, crushed up as small as possible, looking out for a chance sideways so as to get out, when all at once I felt that precious hand clutched like a vice, and on looking up startled, I saw I was the prisoner of that infernal missionary. He had just come from India, and was up to the tricks of the Hindoo converts, and had been watching the whole game through his fingers, while I thought he was praying.

"I got two years for that bit of legerdemain. There was a twenty-pound note inside the envelope, with a card wish-

ing all success to the heathen on one side, and the name of a well-known millionaire squatter on the other, and that finished me up."

"Only two years?" asked the stockrider, astonished.

"Yes; when I saw I was in for it, I told them my name and all about my father without any reserve; that, with a little gospel-gab and howling penitence, got the church people interested in me, and so I was let off easily. Of course the old man would be in a funk when he heard about it, but, being in the service of the Lord, he could always turn it to his advantage by calling it his cross, and preaching about it. That's the one advantage a minister has over a layman when he is disgraced or disgraces himself in any way. He can do King David's dodge and weep, then the disgrace drops off him like water from a duck's back, and he shines out more of a saint than ever.

"I had plenty of time to cool down in prison, for, being the son of my father, they let me off without hard labour, so I sat and considered all the trades, but not one could I think about kindly except this one. It was through reading a History of the Middle Ages which the jail chaplain lent me, in which the mendicant friars flourished, that the original idea first struck me to go about the country leisurely as they did, and live on the goodness of the people. I felt that I could not be a friar in a Protestant country, but I thought I might do just as well as an unlucky digger, so an unlucky digger I have been for the last twenty years, and I am quite satisfied to go on for the next forty years as unlucky. There's my history for you, mates, and yonder is the shanty where I mean to put up for the night."

It was not a very long story, and might have been told within twenty minutes by a vivacious narrator like the lively stockrider, but as retailed out in the indolent drawl of this original of sundowners—for I quite gave him the credit of being the first inventor of this lasting profession, at least in the colony of Victoria—long-drawn-out and emphasised with the snuffle of a converted prison-chaplain pet, blended with the oiliness and persuasive insinuations of an ancient Pandarus who expected to gain applause from us by the relation of his own infamies; this, with the pauses for approval, the frequent stoppages to light up his pipe, and the self-laudatory chuckles at his own smartness or rakish-

ness, had carried us over the mile and a half and the two hours limited to our walk.

"Wait here till I smooth the landlord; I'll come out and call for you when I know it is all right," observed our experienced guide, as he left us at a distance of about twenty yards, and went bravely forward himself towards the light of the open bar.

"A splendid specimen of Christianity that father of sundowners, ain't he?" observed my companion, as he looked after the much-bepatched one with disgust. "Good job he told us that yarn about his father's guest and the church-plate business after I had smoked his pipe instead of before, or else I couldn't have used even his plug. Ugh! by George, I think I'll give up tobacco after this altogether, and stick to honest drink, since he doesn't indulge in the vice. I shouldn't like to take to anything that he indulges in."

I did not reply, I was thinking upon my boyhood's home in England, and the pastor whom my poor old uncle had put into his snug living, and who cut me so conscientiously after he knew I was disinherited, along with the person who had ruined Elsie Kemp.

It was a balmy evening, with a low sighing wind; the sky had become the colour which the sundowner declared was the correct tint for him to make a call upon tender-hearted humanity—*green*.

A delicious green, caused by the fading glow of day, blending with the deep blue of night; the stars were sparkling and flashing out of that green like diamonds set in an enamelled brooch, a brooch specially designed for a Fenian demonstration, say as a token of regard from the moonlighters to the bereaved spouse of an Irish martyr. All the earth was dusky and veiled in mystery, with the exception of that ruddy glow which came from the open door of "The Rose in Bloom," towards which the sturdy father of sundowners was trudging.

We saw him blacken the warm light for a moment, as he looked in with the most ingratiating bend of his burly back, and then the light streamed out once more unbroken; he had been made welcome.

Then, as we watched, we noticed his figure leaning against the counter negligently, with a pewter pot which the landlord had placed before him, and afterwards the

unmistakable action of that pot being raised to his patriarchal beard, the head slowly going backwards, and the two hands elevated until the pewter pot stood bottom upwards altogether.

Then it was set down again, and after a few moments we could see that he had moved inside to the parlour, while we waited patiently for the signal that had not yet come.

The space above us grew darker, and the stars became more lustrous; the sky was now like a mourning-ring set in brilliants.

Half an hour passed while we waited, three-quarters grew to an hour, still no signs of our friend. On the parlour blinds the shadow of the maid-servant moved rapidly as she handed the dishes to the guests; we could even distinguish the steam from these dishes blinding the opaque shadow of that buxom servant-maid.

It was trying to my own nerves, but it became too harrowing to my companion's.

"Blow it! that canting sundowner has left us in the lurch; let's have a shy at the business for ourselves," cried the stockrider all at once, making a frantic clutch at my arm and drawing me along with him.

When we entered the bar it was deserted, but at the sound of my companion clanking the empty pot which the sundowner had left, the landlord appeared from the private door of the parlour, wiping his lips with his apron, and hastily bolting down his last mouthful.

A rosy-faced and short man, with bright brown eyes, and a snub nose, which might have proclaimed his nationality had not his rich brogue rendered denial impossible.

"Well, my foine bhoys, an' sure what moight yez be wanting?"

My companion had entered in desperation, and stood regarding the advent of the landlord with a ferocious glare; but at the sound of his voice a lightning change passed over his visage; there was hope now expressed on his features, and confidence in his voice, as he answered,—

"Two pots of half-and-half."

CHAPTER XX.

STRIKING THE FOREHAMMER.

Was it going to be a repetition of the milk negotiation? I thought, and as I heard this lavish order, given in such confident tones, a guilty trembling seized upon me. This was not the manner in which our church-bred guide had approached the landlord, and was not calculated to touch the soft and charitable spot in his heart.

"Hold hard, dear boy," I whispered; "have you considered how this is to be paid for? I can't stand another chase to-night."

"Leave it all to me, my boy; I have considered, and it shall be paid for." Then aloud, "Any room for us to-night, landlord?"

"Sure, and that depends on the bed you want. If it's a feather bed, I can't oblige ye; if straw will content yez, why, thin, ye may have the empty stable along wid a poor fellow out of luck, who came here before yez."

"That'll suit both ourselves and our purses first-rate, for we have also been a bit unlucky lately. I expect we're too late for supper?"

"Almost, unless ye like to take the lavings, although devilish little has that unfortunate digger left. However, yez had best come indoors, and bring your pots along wid yez. We can square up for what yez have in the morning."

"The game is ours; I was waiting for those last words from the easy man," again whispered my companion, as we prepared to follow our host.

"It's a shame, you know, to impose like this upon good nature. Had we not better make a clean breast of it, and trust to his generosity, he seems a good sort?" I whispered back.

"No; I am going to keep up our dignity in this shanty, and get as much as our bilking friend the sundowner as well. I intend to pay for our accommodation honourably."

"How?"

"By *singing for it*. Can't you see that he has a music-loving pair of ears on his head? Just wait till supper is over, and I'll show you how to work the oracle."

When we got into the parlour, we found the family

gathered round the table, with the very small and cold remains of supper before them. Our friend the sundowner had cleaned his plate, and was telling his tale to the women folk, while he leisurely cut up his tobacco. A doleful tale it had been, and delivered with whimpering effect, so that the tears were standing in the eyes of the landlady.

"Only three months ago all that happened,—five hundred ounces of gold dust and the mother of my six children stolen from me by a dishonest mate. Yes, it was hard on a man to lose all that he prized in one night, and be driven out to the world, friendless and copperless."

"What came of the six blessed children?" inquired the tender-hearted landlady.

"The three youngest died of measles and want of nursing two weeks after my wife deserted them; the three eldest—"

Here the eyes of the narrator fell upon us, and began to roll in an alarmed fashion.

"Hallo, you two fellows, have you actually got this length already?"

"Yes, mate," replied the stockrider. "You hardly expected us to follow so close on your heels, did you, now?"

"Hang me if I did; what trampers you must be. You see, ma'am, I was in a great hurry to get up to the diggings, and, having boots on, left these chaps behind me this morning. How far was it from here that I left you—fourteen miles? or was it more?"

"About that, mate; perhaps a little more, perhaps a little under. We also put on a spurt after you left us."

"You must have done, and I hope it will serve your purpose as well," answered the truthful but unlucky digger, in rather a sour voice.

"I think so, mate," rejoined the stockrider cheerfully. "One can't afford to hang too much back in the bush."

"But what came of the three other children?" asked the landlady.

"One fell into the fire and got burnt, that was Hilda; the other tumbled into a water hole and got drowned, that was Alfred; and the other one—that was Mary."

"Yes; what came of Mary?"

"Ah, ma'am, I can't tell you; it is too sad, too sad."

The digger covered his face with his left hand and sobbed,

while with his right one he accidentally tilted up his empty quart pot, until it stood on the table bottom upwards.

"Sure, and you are the unlucky man."

"I am, ma'am, the most unfortunate man at the present moment in Victoria," answered the sundowner with a broken voice, still covering his eyes, and absently beating a slow tattoo upon the table with the pewter pot.

"Michael, fetch the poor fellow another quart to compose him, an' I'll take a drop of whisky for myself at the same time, for all these terrible misfortunes have quite upset me."

Our dropping into supper, and taking the management of our own affairs into our own hands, did not appear to give our late guide the pleasure it might have been expected to give. Perhaps he wanted to take his own time for speaking about us; perhaps he did not like rivals so close to him, but wanted to shine alone, and was fearful about being eclipsed.

He had certainly circumvented us in the first move, for, not expecting visitors so late, the supper, lavish enough for the wants of the family, had been barely sufficient when spread over to this healthy and unexpected addition, who, according to his custom, wolfed up everything that was set before him, and, as the landlord had warned us, had left precious little behind him.

However, the landlady, after she had swallowed her whisky and wiped her eyes, bustled about, and very soon placed before us a substantial steak, which, with a loaf of home-made bread, and a second supply of beer, made us even inclined to forget the non-fulfilment of his promise.

His system was clearly to work upon the sympathies of his benefactors, and to lower their spirits, while that of the stockrider's was quite the reverse. From the moment he sat down, the landlady wept no more, and the lachrymose sundowner took a back seat; for, in spite of his bright blue eyes, he was not a lively companion. He hadn't an ounce of humour in him, but sat down heavy upon his audience; and when he saw the stockrider carrying everything before him by his jests and jerky anecdotes, he sat broodingly apart, and devoted himself to his jug, which the watchful landlady, still remembering his harrowing sorrows even in the midst of her own laughter, kept him as liberally supplied as he diligently emptied it. For a man who had so many years devoted

himself to honesty, and who was free from the vice of strong drink, he did about as much justice to the landlord's tap as any teetotaller I had ever met before.

"Arrah, but yez are the merry boy," cried the landlord. "Now, sure, can yez not give us the stave of a song to pass the night over?"

"With all the pleasure in life," replied the stockrider, with a slight wink in my direction. I had been admiring the artful way he had been leading up to this request, and waited anxiously to hear how he would acquit himself, with the result, to us, so important.

"What is it to be: English, Scotch or Irish?"

"What suits yez best—only, if it is all the same, we'll take Irish first, and come to the rest by slow degrees."

"Irish be it, then."

The song he sang was "Pat Malloy," a ditty which suited his state of attire to perfection, and he gave it with as rich a brogue as the landlord could have desired:—

"At eighteen years of age I was my mother's white-haired boy,
She kept a little huckster stall, her name it was Malloy.
'I've thirteen children, Pat,' she said, 'whom Heaven has kindly sent,
But children are not pigs, you know, they cannot pay the rent.'
She gave me every shilling that she had in the till,
And kissed me fifty times, as though she'd never have her fill,
'Ah, Heaven bless ye, Pat,' she said, 'but don't forget, my boy,
That Old Ireland is your country, and your name it is Malloy.'

Ah, England is a purty place, of gold there is no lack,
From York to Lunnon on I trudged, with my scythe upon my back,
The English girls are beautiful, their love I can't decline,
The eating and the drinking, too, is plentiful and fine;
But in a corner of my heart, that nobody can see,
Two eyes of Irish blue are always peeping out at me.
Ah! Molly, dear, you never fear, I'm still your own dear boy,
And Old Ireland is my country, and your name shall be Malloy.

From Ireland to Ameriky across the seas I roam,
An' every shilling that I made, och, sure, I sent it home.
My mother couldn't write, you know, but, sure, this came from Father
Joyce,

'Ah, Heaven bless ye, Pat.' I heard my mother's voice.
An' it's now I'm getting home again, as poor as I began,
To make a happy girl of Moll, and that I think I can.
My pockets they are empty, but my heart is filled with joy,
And Old Ireland is my country, and my name is Pat Malloy."

"Arrah, be jabbers! but that's the foinest song I have listened to since I left Ould Oirland, Biddy, me darlint.

We'll drink no more 'swanky' this blessed night; put on the kettle, and let's have the proper brew."

This from the landlord, while he was dancing round the stockrider, kissing and embracing him by turns, as if he had met a long-lost brother, while his wife and daughters whisked away the pewter pots and replaced them with glasses, teaspoons and sugar. I knew what to expect after I saw these extensive preparations.

"Did I spake concerning the stable and a wisp of straw, me boy, for you and your friend? No, by the piper which played before Moses, ye shall have our best bedroom this night to lie in, and be carried up to it also."

"But," observed the singer modestly, "our joint funds hardly allow us to run to such extravagances."

"Holy Mother! is it expenses ye are talking about to Michael Fitzgerald, after delighting his ears wid such a song? Devil a copper of yours or your friend's will I take from you while you honour this shanty wid your presence, not although you stopped wid us for a month of Sundays. There, my boy, ye are my guest, and so call for what ye plaize."

After that the sorrows of the morose sundowner were forgotten, and shortly even he brightened up under the influence of the steaming cup, and, trying to be humorous, almost lost the good graces of the landlady; for, as we had already proved, he was one of those men who are much more tolerable, socially considered, when they are telling doleful stories than when they become light-hearted and humorous. I fancy the second king of Israel must have been of the same kidney, if that account is quite accurate about his merry-making on one occasion, about which poor Michael was so indignant, and, woman-like, would speak out her mind with such disastrous results.

It was a lively night, and kept up to a late hour. I do not know how we got to bed, therefore I must suppose that the Fitzgerald had kept his word, and had us conveyed there. In the morning we woke up with aching heads and exceedingly thirsty throats, which took more than one quart of beer to cool. Then, after a substantial breakfast of bacon and eggs, and a farewell blessing from the landlord and landlady, we once more continued our tramp.

The sundowner was still in the stable when we left,

snoring loudly as he crushed down the straw with his bulky weight, a contented expression upon his heavy features. No one had disturbed him that morning, and we felt satisfied, as we left him behind, that he was not likely to shift from his pleasant quarters until he had worn the hospitality threadbare, and received some hint plainer than words to move on his weary way. That sad, sad secret about Mary would keep him in grub for the next day or two at "The Rose in Bloom."

We had a long and a fagging journey after this before we reached the little township of Killmore; fully eighteen miles to cover with those corrugated, dust-filled roads, and that sun-heat which never abated. We met with no more good Samaritans on the highway, not even one who would trust us with a drink of water to cool our parching tongues; still, we pushed ahead with feverish energy, for my companion was eager to get to his station before nightfall, and I did not wish to be left behind.

At last, about five o'clock in the afternoon, we saw the cluster of houses in front of us, and very shortly afterwards were staggering along the main street, hungry, thirsty, footsore and utterly demoralised with weariness.

"Do you see that house over there?" said my comrade, pausing and pointing to a wooden house with some sheds besides it.

"Yes."

"Go up there and ask for a job. He's a blacksmith and a Methodist, yet a good sort. Say that you are a blacksmith, and he'll give you a trial."

"But I'm not a blacksmith."

"Never mind that, no one learns the trade they follow in Australia; say you are a blacksmith, and it's most likely he'll give you a trial. If you don't please him at first, he may put you to something else. Our station lies five miles from here, but I think you had best try this blacksmith first, for I'm almost sure we are full up at present over there. I'll hang about here until I see whether you are taken on or not. If you get a job, come out and wave your hand, and I'll go on by myself; if you don't succeed, join me here again, and we'll go on together."

I parted from my temporary friend with regret; he was a fine fellow, and lively, if reckless, and had given me more

than one practical hint as we were going along; then a little nervously I approached the smithy.

When I reached the door and looked inside, I saw a hard-featured, stalwart man in leather apron and rolled-up shirt sleeves, a shrewd, harsh yet kindly face, something like the portraits I had seen of Abraham Lincoln.

"Well, youngster, and what can I do for you?" he asked pleasantly enough, as he looked up at me from his anvil.

"I want a job."

"Yes; and what may you be?"

"A blacksmith," I replied, looking down, and the colour mounting into my cheeks. I never could make a false statement gracefully.

"You are, are you? Well, my lad, I do want a hand in the smithy just now. Can you wield the forehammer?"

I murmured that I daresay I could do that all right, when he said,—

"Well, young man, pick up the forehammer, and let's see what you can do; my iron is almost ready."

I went out to the door of the forge and waved my hand to the stockrider, who, with a return wave, limped away. I had not the slightest notion of what a forehammer was; fore—first, that must either be the smallest or the largest hammer on the premises.

I looked about me quickly, and saw a very small hammer which might have been used for driving tacks in. Surely he could not talk about "wielding" that kind of hammer. Next I noticed a very large one standing near the anvil, so I went towards it, wondering if I was correct in my surmise, the blacksmith watching me curiously all the time.

"Yes, that's right; that's the forehammer, young man," said he, when he saw me take hold of this great hammer.

"Now, let me see how you can use it."

With a pair of tongs he removed from the fire a bar of iron which he had been blowing upon with the bellows until it came out a white heat, sputtering and throwing round it fiery stars. This glowing mass he placed upon the anvil, and then, without looking at me, he said,—

"Strike, young man."

What followed will be entirely lost upon any one who has never been inside a smithy when a bar of red-hot iron is being tempered and wielded. I doubt if I could have

understood it myself, if I had not been an important actor in the scene—not the chief actor, I will admit, yet as near to it as Iago is to Othello in the “Moor of Venice.”

My new master stood clutching firmly by the end of the tongs, to hold the flaming iron in its place on the anvil, while I stood with the enormous sledge hammer in my hands a little distance from it, so as to give the blow proper force.

I understood quite well that I was expected to strike with all my might that red-hot bar of iron, and to do so must swing the hammer round my head. This I did quite correctly, and then, as he had ordered me, I brought it down and “struck”—not the red-hot iron, alas, but the end of the tongs nearest to it.

This was not much of a mistake for a young man to make who had never tried the forehammer before, who had walked hard and fasted all day, and was so mortally tired out and aching that he could hardly lift up his arm, far less such a weight; but the result was amazing for all that.

Fancy the sedately humorous face of Abraham Lincoln becoming suddenly convulsed with the most diabolic and violent of apoplectic rages, and the lips of that noble American statesman and philanthropist pouring forth such a stream of vindictive oaths as might have appalled the veteran resident of a barrack-room, and you can feebly imagine this benevolent and religious blacksmith, as he danced wildly round the smithy for the next five minutes, nursing the arm which had lately held the tongs, while I stood leaning upon my hammer handle, and wondering what had made him go stark staring mad so suddenly.

At length the strange fit seemed to abate somewhat, and he recovered his faculties enough to be able to blend a few words with his oaths as he came opposite to me, and shook his nursing fist in my face.

“You — fraud, you — scoundrel, what made you say that you had been accustomed to the forehammer, eh?”

“I didn’t say that, sir,” I replied innocently.

“What the — did you say, then?”

“I said I thought I could strike it; and didn’t I do it hard enough?”

“Yes, by —, you did it hard enough, and a —

sight too hard for my taste. I won't be able to use my arm for a week."

"How is that, sir?"

He looked at me for a full moment, as if he was about to knock me down, and then all at once burst into a wild laugh.

"I really do believe that the young ass doesn't know yet what he has done."

What had I done?

CHAPTER XXI.

OUT OF EDEN.

AFTER that strange, hoarse burst of laughter, my new master recovered himself sufficiently to explain what I had done to him, and then, of course, I was very sorry, and apologised most profusely. Would he give me another trial, and I would do my best to be more careful.

"No, thank you, young man; one trial of strength in that way is quite enough for me. Own up like a man, you never worked in a blacksmith's shop before."

I sorrowfully admitted that I had not.

"I thought so when I first clapped eyes on you; but the confident way you gripped up the right tool deceived me. May God forgive you for your lie, and also for the bad language which you have made me utter, for of course you know that the sin is yours, not mine."

I answered him readily that, for the pain I had unwittingly inflicted upon him, I was quite willing to take the weight of the oaths as well as the falsehood upon my guilty shoulders, upon hearing which he became a little more lenient towards me, informed me that he would offer up special prayers for me that night, so that I might be cured of the terrible sin of swearing and lying.

"They were awful ones, you know, my lad. I never heard worse uttered by man."

"They were a little blood-curling, sir," I answered apologetically.

"But soothing, eh, decidedly comforting at the time used; don't you think so?"

I admitted that they did seem to give relief.

"Yes, that's the worst of it, lad. Never mind, it was a great sin, but you have a great Saviour, never forget that. Now, we'll try to forget this lapse till bedtime. Tell me your name, who you are, and what you can do, and I'll see if I can help you."

After I had told him a few of my colonial experiences, he said,—

"Do you think you could paint a cart without hurting anybody?"

I replied that I thought I might do that without breaking any more of the ten commandments. Then he eased my mind by saying he would engage me.

"That will be your first job to-morrow, Luck, my lad. We'll do no more work or mischief to-night; you are hungry and tired. Come indoors and have a wash, and then I think supper will be about ready, as I expect you are for it."

The blacksmith led me round to the rear portion of his abode, where on a stump of gum-tree stood a basin, soap and towel, near to the rain tank, where we both enjoyed a good scrub and a brush down; then he ushered me into his kitchen, and introduced me to his wife and daughter as his new hand.

They did not seem to pay much attention to my costume or want of boots in this house, but made me welcome very civilly; the mother, a grey-haired woman about fifty, scrupulously tidy, but with rather a stern look in her grey eyes; and the daughter of about seventeen, very pretty and well-formed.

Supper was all ready on the table—a large dish of smoking potatoes, a round of hot corned beef, with mashed pumpkin for vegetables, and the cups and saucers for tea.

Another plate, knife and fork, and extra cup and saucer were placed for me, and then we all sat down together, the father at the head of the table, the mother at the foot, near the teapot, and the daughter and I opposite each other, with the mashed pumpkin close to her, and those mealy potatoes near at hand to me.

"Ask a blessing, John," observed the mother severely, and then the blacksmith began.

I immediately and devoutly bent my head as the others were doing, with my elbow on the table and my hand

shading my eyes, trusting that the grace would soon be over, for I was almost wolfish with hunger, which the steam from the dishes accentuated.

But of all the intercessions for food to be blessed that ever I listened to, this grace was the most elaborate. I had heard about the prayers of the Presbyterians, which were longer than the most lengthy of church sermons. Ovinus Hardwake had accustomed me to a pretty fair length, but the exhortation of this Methodist blacksmith eclipsed them all for multiplicity of subject, earnestness of delivery and almost limitless prolongation.

It was a mighty grace, which I think must have covered the digestion of all the dwellers on earth. My own late iniquities were freely touched upon, and as he warmed up to his work, the words poured out as quickly and almost as loudly as had done his oaths after he had dropped the tongs. There was no mistake about his eloquence and fervour.

But I was starving, while the gracious odour of mashed pumpkin, corned beef and mealy potatoes maddened me beyond politeness, as they wafted my way, and there was no indication that he was nearly finished; the words were rushing forth more impetuously, and the subjects he took up spreading out fan-like.

I stole a glance through my fingers at the blacksmith first, and then at the daughter and mother. His eyelids were pressed firmly together, and his face turned ceiling-wards, while his arms waved wildly about. No chance of him coming back to matters terrestrial for the next half-hour, at least. The other two, like myself, had their faces covered with their hands, and were too hard at work making responses in groans and loud "Amen's" to pay any attention to what occurred at the table.

I felt that I could no longer hold out. I must eat something or die before that blessing was over, and the only thing near me was the dish of potatoes, therefore I softly put out the hand that was not holding up my head, and grasped one.

Then a great shame came over me, because, like the thieving fist of the sundowner in church, I felt my wrist firmly grasped, and on my looking to see the cause, beheld the wife of the blacksmith, with her stern grey eyes fixed

upon me, and her hand upon mine, holding it prisoner amongst the potatoes. I was convicted as a felon.

She never spoke to me or ceased from her responses, but held on to me like grim death until that prayer was ended, and the eyes of the others could witness my shame; then she relaxed her hand with a grim smile, and permitted me to collapse within my chair. There was no use of apologising or making excuses, so I just sat in silence and waited upon my dismissal from this hospitable house.

"That was bad, my lad, very bad not to wait until the grace was over," said my master gravely; "but I suppose you were extra hungry, and I forgot about it—something else we must remember at bed-time."

I am afraid that my late associations must have blunted my susceptibilities, or else hunger is the grand demolisher of dignity, for no sooner had I been lectured in this paternal manner than, after casting a timid glance over at the daughter, Miss Ruth, and reading nothing more severe in her glance than demure amusement at my misadventure, I fell to on the corned beef, the pumpkins, and the desecrated potatoes as if I was the most abandoned sundowner in existence. The pious blacksmith was as bountiful with his provisions as he was with his supplications and admonitions, so that, when I left that table, I felt as happy and as grateful as any poor soul redeemed out of purgatory could have felt. If he had wanted me to make a chapel mat out of, I would have cheerfully dedicated my body to the service of the Lord in that way; his wife, his daughter and all his other goods and chattels were sacred to me for evermore.

After supper Mr and Mrs Blacksmith dressed themselves, and announced that they were going out to a prayer meeting. They asked me if I'd like to go, but, after following my glance over my habiliments, they delicately excused me, and, much to my surprise, told their daughter to stay behind and amuse me until their return.

"We must get you a Sunday suit as soon as possible, and then you can go to meeting with us," said my benefactor, as he went out with his wife on his arm, leaving me behind with his only child. What a wave of fidelity swept over me at this noble and simple confidence. I suppose Gyp, who was making himself comfortable on the hearth-rug, could have understood it, but no biped could.

Ruth was a nice girl, with a sly fund of Mother Eve in her, and, after the manner of her bringing up, rather formal and sedate in her merriment. We soon threw aside reserve, being young, and were very quickly on familiar terms, so that I forgot my rags and blistered, bare feet, and leaned back in the horsehair chair of the parlour, talking and laughing quite naturally.

There was a harmonium in the parlour, and at my request Ruth sat down to play, while I turned over the music for her. There was nothing in her music stand excepting hymns and psalms, and these of a very cold and unsympathetic order.

"Do you play?" asked Ruth, suddenly turning to me after she had favoured me with a few dreary and barren pieces.

"A little," I answered modestly.

"Will you play *me* something?"

I sat down quietly to the harmonium. I had not been used much to harmoniums, the piano was what I mostly had practised upon in my idle moments, but I had taken at one time lessons on the organ, so I thought I could manage it, as I knew a few pieces from ear, not sacred, but leisurely enough to go with this instrument.

Picture me, if you can, in my foul rags, in such a comfortable puritan's parlour, with my hair hanging over my shoulders like an Italian organ-grinder, and my budding beard curling round like monkey-down over my cheeks and chin, my swollen, blistered feet working the stepboard, and my black eyes rolling heavenward under the influence of divine music, quite regardless of the pretty girl who sat in the easy-chair near at hand, nursing that reprobate Gyp on her knee, thinking, as I played on unconsciously, upon some moonlight walks which I had taken with Sabina. Ridiculous, wasn't it, in a tatterdemalion?

"Juinetta," "Ever of thee I'm fondly dreaming," "Thy bright smile haunts me still," etc. Sometimes I played without singing, sometimes, when I knew the songs, I sang them with my playing. My voice was a husky tenor, not like the stockrider's, cheery and room filling, but good enough where the music could help it; but I was nowhere without an accompaniment.

What a power music has over one when they are fond of it, whether they are great shakes at it or not. Once I sat

down to that instrument I forgot all about my day's tramp, forgot everything, in fact, that I ought to have recollected, that I was in a puritan's house, where songs were counted as wiles of the evil one, I played and sang no church music that night, but went on and on, like the heedless fool that I was.

All at once a heavy hand was laid on my half-naked shoulders, and looking round I saw the blacksmith, with a very stern face, bending over me, his wife with folded hands, grim and implacable, a little distance away, and Ruth, with my dog on her knee, bending towards me, with her pretty mouth half open and her eyes starlike and glistening.

"Young man," I heard that deep voice utter slowly, "I condoned the oaths which you were responsible for, and the lies that you uttered. I overlooked the attempted theft of the potatoes as a yielding of the flesh to temptation, but I'll be damned if I countenance the defiling of my daughter's mind. Go your way in peace, and may the Lord take care of you, for you are too heavy a burden for me."

With his firm grasp still on my shoulder he led me towards the front door, my dog following at my heels, and pushing me gently outside to the starlight, he locked it behind me, and once more I was homeless.

For a few minutes I stood dazed outside that paradise, leaning my head against the weatherboards, wondering what the matter was, as I had marvelled at the sudden effects of my sledge-hammer stroke, then, picking myself up, I began to meditate upon what was the most important point to me at the moment, the seeking of a shelter for the night.

I looked about me. The lights were still shining in most of the houses, for it was not late. In front of me, and not far distant, I saw the village inn, with the doors open, and more brilliantly lighted up than the other houses. I would try them; they might be short-handed in the stables, as some gold-diggings were not far off, which always lured most of the servants away.

When I reached the door of this inn I saw a man leaning up against the horse-post and smoking a pipe.

"Good evening, sir," I said.

"Good evening, mate," the voice replied.

I felt, from the using of that word "mate," that I might approach him.

"Do you know if they require a stable hand inside?"

"I don't know about the stables, but I want a man," replied the stranger.

"Do you, sir? Then perhaps I'll suit you, for I want a job badly."

"Come inside till I have a squint at you," and following the smoker I went inside to a private room.

"Waiter, please to send us in two brandies and sodas with cigars."

I looked up at my man as he was looking at me. A gentleman farmer, I thought, with heavy moustache and the rest of his face bare. His hat was over his eyes, so that I could not see what they were like.

"What can you do, my lad?"

"I know a good deal about horses, and could be trusted in a stable," I replied.

"Nothing else? Could you not do any book-keeping, or say general writing—translation of foreign languages or writing foreign letters?"

"I know French, German, Italian, and Spanish a little."

"Enough to correspond in these languages?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you'll just suit me, *Luck Mort*."

"Hallo! you know me, sir?" I replied rather quickly, and, I am afraid, drawing myself up just a little in my old home way, forgetful of my rags, for I was sensitive at being recognised by former acquaintances.

"Yes, perfectly; and don't you know me?"

The stranger tilted back his hat, and altered his voice, so that I could see his eyes.

"Walker! Confound it, why did you sell me like that?"

"Not Walker, Luck. My present name is Gowanlock, remember that. But, all the same, I do want you badly just now. I heard you were on the road yesterday, and came over here expressly to see you."

The waiter now came in with the brandy and cigars, so that I said nothing until he had retired.

"Well, Mr Gowanlock, what do you want with me?"

"I've got a billet in Melbourne for you which I think will just suit you, and as I had a hint how you were placed at present I took the liberty of bringing over with me a port-manteau of clothes, and hired a bedroom for you at the same

time. Jessie is upstairs waiting on us, and supper will be ready soon, so don't you think you had best go upstairs and make yourself presentable before supper, and then we can talk business over afterwards?"

"That depends on the business, old man. You know I won't join you in anything shady."

"Ah, this is all right, you may depend, and the clothes in your portmanteau were all purchased on the square. Jessie brought them up with her from Melbourne expressly for you, so don't stand on any more stilts. I wouldn't hurt you now, Luck, for the loot of a bank."

He looked at me lovingly, and touched my arm gently, so that I felt like a brute to be suspicious any longer, therefore, without more ado, I followed him upstairs and into the bedroom he had taken for me.

"Get on your duds as soon as you can and join us in No. 8," and with these words he left me to myself.

I think most young men about the age of twenty-three will sympathise with me when I tell them that I was not at all sorry to lay aside those dilapidated shirt and trousers and dress myself up in the light-grey suit which I found amongst my stock. Jessie Carew had displayed very good taste, if a trifle dandyish, and it was a real pleasure to find myself once more inside a white shirt, with a clean collar and necktie. The boots fitted me exactly, after I had bathed my feet for a while and covered them with the striped socks she had provided, so that in about half an hour I was ready to join them in No. 8, once more a civilised being, with the exception of my short beard and long hair, which I resolved to get rid of on the first opportunity.

I found them assembled when I got down. Jessie, her lover, and Dicky, with a nice little supper laid ready.

Dicky, with turned-down collar, Eton jacket, and grey trousers, a very nice and shy-looking schoolboy indeed; Jessie, dressed modestly and well; James Walker, in rough cheviots.

"My sister, Luck, Miss Gowanlock—my ward, young Dicky Smart, just going on to a seminary near Melbourne."

Jessie rose, and smiled while she extended her hand to me, Dicky hung his head a little sheepishly, as schoolboys will, as the waiter brought on the roast chicken and frittered potatoes, the wine being already uncorked and flasked.

After supper, when the things were removed and the brandy decanter, with cigars, placed handy, my friend dismissed the waiter, and making himself comfortable, turned towards me.

"Now for business, old boy."

CHAPTER XXII.

A WIFE PROVIDED, WITH A GOOD BILLET THROWN IN.

BEFORE we began to talk, that discreet boy Dicky rose from his chair, and gliding over to the door, opened it quietly and went outside, shutting it carefully behind him, the pseudo Mr Gowanlock looking after him with an approving glance.

"Astonishing ward that of mine; seems to understand everything by instinct. Do you know what he is up to now?"

"No."

"He has gone to keep the door free of eavesdroppers. He knows the habits of waiters, and I bet you he is leaning over the banisters, just over against the door, in a boylike, unsophisticated fashion, and that he will not budge from that post until we finish our confabulation."

"He appears to be much attached to you."

"Yes," answered the bushranger. "As long as that remarkable boy remains near to me I don't think that I shall be caught; while I sleep, he watches, and when he takes his I cannot very well tell you. I have caught him at his forty winks, often seen him on his back in the position of sleep, but neither I nor anyone else ever caught him sound. He will wake up quietly and wide the moment anything living comes within ten yards of him. Even a strange cat entering the room will wake him up, with an instant knowledge of something more being in the room than when he fell asleep. He is quiet always, waking or sleeping, and never to be taken by surprise."

"A useful companion for you?"

"He is. I should have been taken dozens of times but for him, and betrayed also by my companions, only for that keen, doglike instinct which he possesses, and by which he is able to discern friends from foes. Dicky is my speaking

dog, and goes with me everywhere, as Gyp does with you, for he loves the excitement of a robbery as dogs delight in poaching. I suppose you did not think he was watching you the first night he came to Latour's Coffee Palace?"

"No; I did not see him look much in my direction," I replied.

"Only once, as he did at the others, and then he summed you up, and told me you were safe. What a detective that boy would make if he was not a born thief and the watchdog of an outlaw!"

Captain Rainbow leaned back in his chair, after pushing the cigars over in my direction, and slowly lit his pipe, then, pouring himself out a glass of brandy, he passed the decanter.

Jessie had left us by ourselves, and was sitting in front of the piano, trying over softly the hotel pieces of music which were lying about.

I looked at the captain, and saw that he appeared more careworn and thinner than he had been before; but perhaps that was his ordinary expression when the beard was removed.

"Well, Luck, I can at last do you a good turn without endangering you in any way, and perhaps serve myself at the same time. As I said before, I have found a good billet for you."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It is sub-editor in the office of *The Financial Diver*."

"Has Stringy Bark resigned?"

"No; he has been elevated into editor and society par writer on the paper. It appears that while in London he once saw the Royal Family quite close, at a review or something of that sort, and he is now delighting and instructing the Melbourne liberty lovers with personal anecdotes about the upper ten thousand and the crown heads of Europe. Little Stringy has invention and cheek for anything. His weekly contributions are about the only reading that amuses me in my adventurous life, for I am a regular subscriber—under another name, of course. His usual method of writing about the heir to the throne of England is 'Bertie, dear boy.' Anything under this he turns up his nose at with contempt."

"Has he offered me the post?"

"Yes. His knowledge of foreign languages is not very extensive, and he has advertised for a sub who can undertake foreign correspondence."

"Then he has not specified me in particular?"

"No; but I have got you the post through some influence which a friend of mine has with the proprietor. Your duties will not be heavy, merely to help Stringy with a German, or Italian, or French term of familiarity or contempt when he wants to slang or flatter some foreign potentate. He'll do all the original work himself."

"Is Mr Ovinus Hardwake still the proprietor? For, if so, I don't expect much favour from him."

"Ah, he will not interfere with you after you deliver your letter of introduction, which this friend of mine has written for you, and I think you can get on all right with Stringy."

"Ah, yes, I think I can enjoy the company of Stringy Bark for a while. What salary do they offer for this remarkably light post?"

"Five guineas per week, will that suit you?"

"Yes."

I remained silent for a few moments after this, puffing at my cigar, and thinking how easy, after all, it is to drop into a good billet when one has someone to speak a good word for one, and wondering if I had been dreaming about the past weeks of misery, or if this present conversation was an imaginary one, from which I would presently awake to find myself once more on the road and in my rags.

"Then you accept this offer?"

I started from my reverie at the words, and looked at my companion, to find him regarding me with haggard and feverish eyes, unlike his usual calm self-possession. Instantly, at the sight, I became once again suspicious.

"You said that I might serve you as well as myself by taking this billet, what did you mean by that?"

"I will tell you, Luck, and once more throw myself on your mercy. I want you to take Jessie down with you to Melbourne, and look after her while she is there; in fact, old man, I am going to have my final try for liberty, and"—his voice grew suddenly husky as he looked towards the girl, still playing on at the common music hall pieces, then he moistened his lips and continued—"and I have no one to

trust excepting you in this business. I want you to pass her off as your *wife*."

"My wife, Walker?"

"Yes. It's the only way to throw the detectives off my track. They suspect her to have been sweet upon me, and so, if she goes back single, they will shadow her day and night, and give her no chance of managing for me; but if you and she live together as Mr and Mrs Mort they will come to the conclusion that, woman like, she has thrown me over and taken you, particularly if you accept that billet and so have the visible means of keeping a wife."

"Does she know of this plan of yours?"

"Yes, we have talked it over."

"It is a great trust you propose placing in me, Walker."

"I know that, old fellow; but I can trust both Jessie and you—you see I was not altogether blind when Miss Condon was in Melbourne."

Sabina. Ah, suppose she should hear about this fictitious marriage and think it real.

"I know what you are thinking about, Luck, but there is no danger of that young lady hearing about it. You will take quiet lodgings, or better still, a little furnished house at Williamstown, where Jessie will act as your housekeeper. She is a first-rate general servant and cook, so won't want any help, and will make you comfortable while you are beside her. All you have to do is to let her go shopping as Mrs Mort, and keep your house, go to your office, or to your club, or sit at home as you please, the detectives will soon find her out, and after they satisfy themselves on the subject, will leave her alone, then she will try and manage my business for me. As for Miss Condon or her people hearing about it, I'll see that they don't."

"You?"

"Yes, I know the young lady, as you are already aware, and am on visiting terms with her father, and, as I have told you, they are under my special protection. They have not heard that James Walker is Captain Rainbow, for the police have kept that matter dark since they did not succeed in catching me that time, thanks to you, old chap, so that I sometimes visit them, when I am in that direction, and say a good word for you. I can tell you that Sabina is

mightily interested in that young man Luck Mort. Girls find their hearts soon in the colonies."

"Have you seen her lately? Does she know what I have been doing? I mean, how is my dog Bernard getting on?"

"I saw her two weeks ago, and she was looking quite womanly. She had received a letter from you, but did not tell me about it, you may be sure; her father did, though. She knows what you have told her in your letters about yourself, nothing more, and the dog Bernard is doing famously; there is my budget of news about the Condons."

"She never said, in any of her letters, that you were there."

"No? I am such an unimportant item in her existence that possibly she may have forgotten to mention such a trifle."

I began to look on Walker with a new interest.

"Now, Luck, if ever a rumour reaches that station about your supposed marriage, which isn't the least likely, I'll contradict it flatly, there's my hand on it, so let us settle the business and say you accept the billet and the burden until I can take her off your hands. Believe me, my friend, I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't a case of life or death with me. It's my last chance, my gang are getting tired of my mild measures, and I am dead sick of them and the dingo life I lead. One more push I mean to make for the land of Edom, one last struggle for liberty and happiness with the woman I love. If this stroke fails, then I shall give it up and cave in."

After this passionate outburst it wasn't in me to hold back any longer, so I took the trembling outstretched hand in mine, and promised that I would do as he desired. After this we discussed the details and arrangements until bedtime, Jessie Carew leaving the piano and joining us at the table.

"Jessie has her eye on a place already, she found it in Monday's paper, and wrote straight away about it. Answer to be left at the General Post Office."

"Has the answer to be addressed to Mrs Mort?" I asked, with an awkward laugh, as I turned to Jessie.

"No, Luck; it would be unlucky to take a title before we were quite sure of it, and I want all the good omens to attend upon this venture," answered Jessie gravely.

"You will both take the coach to-morrow, and if the house suits go straight there as soon as you arrive in the city and get settled down. I know the address, so unless you

change your mind about it there is no use writing. Next morning, Luck, present yourself at the office of the *Diver*, and give your letter of introduction to Mr Ovinus Hardwake. All the rest will be easy sailing as far as you are concerned. Jessie will look after you—like a sister."

"Must I announce my marriage at the office?"

"No; keep them in the dark as long as you can both about Jessie and where you live. It isn't likely that Mr Hardwake will interest himself about your domestic affairs, you are not wealthy enough for that."

"Nor high enough in the social scale for Stringy to care about, I suppose."

"With him you must be careful, for of course he will very quickly ferret out the mystery. Does he know how you have been roughing it lately?"

"No; I have seen him in the distance, but have avoided him, and most others whom I knew."

"Good; then wait until he finds out the mystery first, then spin him a yarn. Say it was all arranged between Jessie and you while she was on at the theatre, and that you have been living up the country as a storekeeper before you saw his advertisement. It will tickle the little fellow's vanity to think that his rubbishy paper is read so far from town. Better fix on Warrnamboo as the site of your supposed last place of residence, it is a good way off and in the opposite direction to this—only, be sure to give him a story, or he will make one which may astonish you. By the way, did you see that animal Macintosh again before you left?"

When I told him about my last interview with Sandy he swore a deep oath.

"Look well out for that ruffian, Luck; he has joined a desperate gang of cut-throats since his release from prison, who have several times made overtures for joining us; in fact, this is one of my reasons for wishing to cut the connection as quickly as possible, for the majority of my men are in favour of admitting them, and if they do, my time will very soon be up. Hitherto I have managed to keep out murder and brutality from our crimes against society—no easy matter, I can tell you, with such a mixture as I control—but, as I have told you, many of them are growing discontented with tame 'sticking up,' cattle stealing, and house-breaking, and they want to go the whole hog."

Soon after this we retired, as we had to be up early in the morning to catch the stage coach. In my bedroom I overhauled my portmanteau, and found that Jessie had neglected nothing which was required for a young married man who had a loving wife to look after his wants. It was a strange ending to my late experience to find myself provided with a wife and the prospect of a comfortable billet and cosy home, and all done for me without any effort on my own part.

I did not attempt to look forward to the troubles which might be coming to me out of all this. Since I had been with my stockrider friend I had learnt a good deal of philosophy, and to content myself with the present, when it was good. "Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof," I thought, as I plunged into bed and blew out the light.

Next morning James Walker came in with a pair of scissors and shaving apparatus, and proved himself a very capable barber. My long tresses were shorn off, and my tender beard removed, leaving me once more with a neatly cut moustache and clean cheeks. My rags of yesterday were pitched under the counterpane with very little regard, and once more I stepped down to breakfast something like a gentleman.

Jessie was there waiting for us, and attired for the journey, and when after breakfast the coach rolled up, I began the return to Melbourne under very different auspices to those under which I had come up.

As we drove past the blacksmith's house I saw the family at the door, watching our departure. I took off my hat and waved it towards them, but although they returned my salute it was clear that they didn't recognise me.

Past "The Rose in Bloom," where we stopped to change horses. I took Jessie into the parlour, and had some refreshments with her, for amongst my other gifts I found a well-filled purse. I also stood a good drink to the landlord, and a pot of beer to the unlucky digger, who was still lingering outside the bar and preparing for his journey. Neither of them knew me again, although it was only yesterday that we had parted. Indeed, my noble "sundowner" repaid his drink by informing me about the forty-mile tramp he had taken two days before, without meat or drink all the way; he only

wanted enough to carry him on to the diggings, if I'd be so kind.

I was not kind, yet he blessed me gratefully all the same for what I had given him, even if it was only a drink of beer, and so once more we drove away, blanking out the shanty behind us in the clouds of dust which we raised.

We had two or three stoppages after this—dinner and a long rest at one place, supper and a short sleep at another, starting again after midnight, and so on through the early morning, bringing up about breakfast time at the Melbourne stables.

After breakfast we hired a cab, and calling at the post office, Jessie got her expected letter, to find that the house at Williamstown had been reserved for our inspection, so without further delay we went off together.

"Look out, Luck; do you see a cab following us?"

I looked out as she told me, and said that there was a cab coming behind us.

"Detective on my trail already. I saw him when I got out for my letter," answered *Mrs Mort* calmly. "All the better, he'll leave me sooner alone."

True enough, when we reached the house I saw that the other cab had stopped also, a little distance off, while the cabman appeared to be looking for a number, and then I knew that Jessie was correct in her surmise.

The house was a little wooden structure, clean and plainly furnished, with a nice front garden, verandah in front, and backyard. Inside there was a parlour, two bedrooms, and a cosy kitchen, with every utensil necessary for a young couple to enjoy themselves. The landlady lived a little distance away, and the price she asked per week was moderate in the extreme.

"Will this suit you, Luck?" observed Jessie, after our survey.

"The very thing," I replied.

"Then dismiss the cab while I settle with Mrs Brown for the first week and give her our name."

When I got back, after paying Jehu and seeing him join the other driver at the corner, I found Jessie and the landlady good friends.

"My husband is out at his office all day, and we won't have many visitors the first month or so at anyrate."

The landlady smiled knowingly as she grasped the situation.

"I hope you'll be comfortable, Mr and Mrs Mort; it's clean, if plain, and if you want anything more I'm not far off."

"That we shall be, I'm sure, Mrs Brown. Now, Luck, off with your coat and help me to put things to rights before we go shopping."

It was all true, then, and no dream. I had a wife and a house of my own all on the hire system.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FINANCIAL DIVER.

WHEN I called next morning at the office of *The Financial Diver* I found the office boy there, if I might call a man well advanced past the sixties a boy. He looked a boy for agility, he earned the salary of a boy, attempted to put on the airs and devilry of a boy, and was called by the rakish contributors "The old boy."

I had come punctual to office hours, and was therefore about two hours too early for anyone connected with it to turn up, yet while I waited I had a very interesting conversation with old Mr Niblet, the office boy and watch-dog. He had witnessed the birth and death of many a paper during his long and eventful lifetime, and was a perfect storehouse of information, having been in most of the offices in London before coming out for his health to Australia. I found out afterwards that they did not require to keep either an encyclopædia or a directory in the office since they had secured the services of Niblet. He had been an office boy all his life, and been sworn at by all the literary lions who had raged through Grub Street, from the days of the grand old roarers down to the mewling and snarling of the fatherless and motherless cubs who have been left milkless to occupy the lair, and weary listeners with their feeble yelpings.

Niblet was a keen reader of character, and a very cynical humorist in his own way. He might have become an editor often, but he preferred the malicious fun of watching the growth and decay of these fugitive vegetables, with his paste

brush in his hand. He loved to watch them springing up like green peas from the earth, and blooming out in all their glory; positively gloated in abasing himself before them like an oriental slave; when they yelled and swore at him, flew to do their behests like a wicked genii under temporary control; gave them all the assistance, he could give them, with assiduity, to spread out as completely as they could, and then watched them shrivelling down after they were ripe, before he shovelled them out for a fresh crop.

"This is my tool house," he would remark airily, waving his arms round at the shelves, which were becoming filled with "returns." "Inside there," pointing his long skinny forefinger at the door of the editorial sanctum, "lies my bit of garden. Scarlet runners thrive best in that kind of soil, and I've a rare crop coming on now—the most rapid climbers I ever passed through my hands—they are flowering now, and make a splendid show, then comes the beans, and after that—I shall have to change my quarters."

"Won't it stand a second crop?" I asked, amused at his metaphor.

"It has had a second crop, sir. I reckon you are the last bean that this garden will carry, if I am correct in my surmise that you are the applicant for our sub-chair."

"Yes, that is my mission here to-day," I replied. "Is there a chance?"

"Oh, yes, if your recommendation suits. Our editor told me last night that a friend of his would likely call for the post to-day—are you a friend of that great man?"

"If you mean the gentleman who writes under the *nom de plume* of 'Stringy Bark,' yes, I am a friend of his."

"*Nom de guerre*, my dear sir, when you speak about that brave and dauntless warrior our editor-in-chief. Ah, that is a scarlet runner, if you like, for any gardener to be proud about. You are a fortunate bean to have his tendrils ready to grip on to you and haul you out of the soil when you once pop up above ground. But hush! my lord and master cometh."

I heard a pattering up the stairs at this moment, and turned about to behold my old friend Stringy Bark attired in the most faultless of fashionable morning costumes. He had discarded the picturesque flannel suit which he once affected, and was now got up to suit the tastes of the loungers who

frequented the "Block" in Collins Street on Saturday, with the Athenæum, Melbourne, and Yorick Clubs during the afternoons and evenings of other days. His wrinkled eyeridges suited an eye-glass, so that he had one something like a saucer imbedded amongst the wrinkles of his cheek and eyebrow; a diamond pin fastened his light necktie, a watchguard, no longer Abyssinian gold, crossed both sides of his tiny vest, in the centre of which dangled a jewel-crusted locket; his patent leather boots were topped with snowy gaiters; and the left hand, which carried his gold-headed malacca and dove-grey glove, glistened with flashing rings. He was a toff and no mistake—a scarlet runner at the very height of its blooming.

He had ran up the steps lightly, for he was light and active, but at the top of them he relapsed into that stately gravity suitable to a chief, and paced deliberately forward, ignoring me completely.

"Morning, Niblet. Any telegrams this post?"

"Yes, sire, the usual complement, spread out upon your desk, per usual, for your inspection by yours humbly," answered the old boy, bowing over his counter with a deep obeisance and an outward spread of his hands and paste brush.

"Any personal applicants for the post?"

"One only, your majesty, this young man."

"Morning, young man," observed Stringy, without glancing at me. "Will attend to you presently." Saying which he passed within the sanctum, and shut the door loudly behind him.

"Isn't that a bean, now, worthy of any flower show?" murmured the old boy, with a glance of admiration at the closed door. "Napoleon wasn't within shouting distance of him while he lasted. Ah, give me the little ones for true greatness—Bonaparte, Tom Thumb, Henry H. Stanley, and Stringy Bark."

After waiting in the outer office for over half an hour I heard a wild shriek, from the inner sanctum, which made me leap from my lean against the counter with a fright.

"Niblet!"

"My master calleth," explained Mr Niblet, as he dropped his paste brush and darted inside to answer that shrill, sharp cry.

While I waited on the result of this appalling tocsin I heard, through the door which this oriental genii had left on the jar as he entered, the thin voice of my former shipmate.

"Is the young man still waiting?"

"He is, most potent one," the obsequious yet mocking old boy replied.

"Then show him in; and see here, Niblet—"

"Yes, sire."

"None of your damned impertinence. Get."

"I fly, my master."

Next moment I was inside, and had my first survey of an editorial sanctuary.

"Close the door, young man, and take that chair."

I obeyed the first order, and then sat down to wait upon the next. In front of me sat Stringy, almost hidden by the enormous writing-table before him, with a perfect pyramid of opened letters and telegrams on the desk. On another table lay piles of books, sent in from the publishers for review purposes, and on the walls were hung maps and advertisement sheets.

"Is the door fast shut?"

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Ah! then we may relax, Luck, my son. Have a cigarette."

"You are a wonderful character, Stringy," I said, after I had accepted his offer and lit up.

"Have you only discovered that now, stupid? We must keep up the majesty of the press or where should we be—eh?"

"I don't know."

"Then I must teach you, if you have to act under me. No cussed familiarity before underlings, you understand, my boy. I'm your master while I occupy this chair."

"I think I shall be able to knuckle down to that chair; *it is big enough*," I replied.

"But, say, Luck Mort, can you really do what my advertisement asks for? The boss wants to take you on, so that it doesn't really matter whether you can or not, you know, as dictionaries are cheap enough; yet I'd feel all the safer about the right gender if you could."

"What are my duties, Stringy?"

"Well, do you know French enough to put me right as to gender when I'm doing the expletives in that language?"

"Ah, yes, I can manage that all right."

"And Italian and German?"

"Yes; Spanish also, if you want to curse in that lingo. In fact I think I could even keep you all right in Hindostanee and Arabic. Very good languages these two last are for reviling a man, and the Spanish isn't far behind them."

"I know; Captain Mayne Reid—*Carajo, carrambo, maldito, chingaro, madre di Dios*, and all that sort of thing. You can do it grammatically, Luck, can you?" cried Stringy eagerly, with all his old larikin vivacity.

"Yes, I can keep you from making too much of an ass of yourself, Stringy."

"That's bully; now show me your recommendations."

"I have a letter of introduction here, but it is addressed to Mr Hardwake."

"Out with it; I am his representative."

"But it is marked private and confidential, and sealed, sir."

I laid my letter before the little man, who turned it over, discomfited.

"The boss is a bit particular about his private correspondence, I must say; but, as this is an ordinary letter of introduction, which you and I know about, I suppose it would be only within my province to open it. What do you think, Luck?"

"No, I think not, Stringy, with that caution written upon it."

"Who is it from?"

"I am not at liberty to say."

"Hang it all! there goes the governor, whistling like mad through his tube, so he must have come in earlier than usual; let's hear what he wants."

Stringy went over to the telephone tube, and after shouting down "Yes," put his ear to it for a moment.

"He wants you, Luck, so you had better go in at once. He is coming, sir—Niblet."

Again the weird shriek for his slave, and once more the obedient one put in his head.

"Show this young man into Mr Hardwake's office, and, young man—"

"Yes, sir."

"Come back to me if you are enrolled upon the staff and I'll give you your instructions."

"Yes, sir."

I followed the aged scarlet bean gardener along the passage till we came to the proprietor's room, when, after a low knock and a loud "Come in," I entered.

Mr Ovinus Hardwake sat at a similar writing-table to that of Stringy's, dressed in the same way as he used to dress on board *The Vanborough*, respectably and quietly.

But he was changed, since I saw him last, considerably. Decidedly older looking, more jaded and restless in his movements, his eyes, too, were deeply sunken in his head, with bistre shadows under them and pinky lids; and what struck me more particularly, for such a rigid abstainer as I had known him to be, with the early hour of the day, an open champagne bottle stood in front of him, with a glass newly charged.

"Shut the door, Mr Luck Mort, and take that chair while I read your letter."

The chair he pointed to was one by the window, and a good distance from his desk, and as it was placed turned from him, I handed him the letter, and taking the chair indicated, waited while he read it, watching the passers-by in the street. Yes, Jessie was quite correct about us being shadowed, for I saw through the wire blind Detective Smith, on the opposite side, engaged in a deep conversation with the local policeman.

Fiveminutes passed, and then Mr Hardwake addressed me.

"This letter from my friend, Mr—ah—Mr—you know his name, don't you?"

"No, Mr Hardwake," I replied, turning round.

"That's no matter; he gives you a good character, and from what I know of you myself, it is quite satisfactory. Consider yourself engaged as sub-editor at five guineas a week, which is the amount I see you rate your services at. Now go back to the editor, he will tell you what to do, and—good morning."

Mr Ovinus Hardwake took his pen from the ink-pot, and without looking at me, began diligently to write. I saw that his hand trembled very much, and that he licked his whitened lips with his tongue, as I looked at him in the passing, then I went softly out to get my instructions and begin my duties.

It was almost a sinecure to me this post of sub-editor, particularly at the beginning of the week, for we went to

press at the latter end, and no one thought about doing anything until the last moment, when all was hurry and bustle, with much blasphemy directed to old Niblet, who, having been cursed all the days of his life by editors, contributors, outside victims, and printers, only seemed to brighten up the more as press night approached nearer, when he knew that he could warm his aging blood in a hotter atmosphere than usual.

My office was a little partitioned box between the chief's sanctum and the publishing shop, where Niblet officiated, so that I was within easy call of both of them. There was no window to it, and little ventilation, while the gas had to be used constantly. Here I was expected to sit when not wanted in the sanctum, read through all the papers and magazines, both English, Continental, and Colonial, and cut out any extracts, such as fashionable items, for the editor to make his original and scathing remarks upon, commercial items, for the consideration of the proprietor, who still kept to that department, with home reviews on the books we had received, as a guide to the outside reviewers to whom they were handed, with instructions as to how they were to be treated.

On the regular staff we had a publisher, whose duty it was to issue the copies, an advertising agent, who canvassed for ad.'s—he was not on salary, but paid according to results—these, with a couple of accountants, completed the list of regular hands.

The outside contributors, who were paid according to work accepted, were diversified in their social standing, and Stringy Bark had the interviewing of them to do in the earlier portion of the week. Sometimes a parliamentary writer looked in with a few notes, sometimes a fashionable lady appeared with a spicy piece of scandal, for which she received her guinea. More often, very seedy-looking individuals were admitted, these were Stringy's spies and agents, commissioned to find out the dark spots in society, although there were other secret agents, both male and female, who dressed well, dined well, and were received without suspicion inside good houses, who lived, or at least made some extra pocket-money, by the same kind of work. Russia is not the only place where spies find employment, as I learnt before long while engaged upon this financial and society Diver.

We had a numerous following of critics and book reviewers—art, dramatic, and musical. These were mostly

composed of young fellows whom Stringy had scraped acquaintance with at the clubs, and who did the work for the free passes they got to the theatres and concerts, with the books to add to their bookcases. They were not required to write very much, or show abilities ; all that they had to do was obey orders from the little master, praise up those who had made it worth while, or blackguard whoever he had a down upon. I used to be much amused, as was Niblet, at these literary cadets when they sauntered in, with their tall talk and consequential airs, discussing the feelings of some unfortunate whom they had just damned, or, at least, in their cackling conceit, imagined that they had. It seemed such a delightful thing to them to hold this power and to use it in what they termed this "slashing fashion." Poor young prigs, they felt, I could see, as fierce and brave as a boy does sometimes when he is knocking off the heads of the dandelions with his stick.

"These are the weeds which will crop up amongst my runners," observed the old man, leering after them as they passed in. "They never come to much though—ah, no! There isn't a real day nettle amongst them, they are only chickweed and groundsel."

They did not do much harm, although they had all the intention in the world to pose as stingers. In the first place, because none of them had the strength to hurt ; in the second place, because our "Rag," as the old boy called it, only sold to the few most interested in it. Every week the railway carrier brought back the previous week's edition nearly intact, which was sent, after Niblet had placed a few dozen on the shelves, straight from the office to the paper mill. Stringy could always boast in his clubs that, beyond these few copies kept back, the last week's issue had been sold out—so it had, always.

Mr Ovinus Hardwake did not depend upon promiscuous sales, nor did he push them much. He made sure of his profit, in the way Stringy had described, each week before he went to press. Of course the victims didn't know what a limited circulation the paper had, or they might have resisted. Each week the posters went flaring over the city announcing the enormous increase of *The Financial Diver*. This and Stringy's club lies kept up its reputation, so that we were a most flourishing concern.

We had only one contributor on the staff who had any experience in journalism, and he was, like that other experienced official Niblet, rather looked down upon by the embryo cubs, and very much underpaid. He attended police courts, inquests, and accidents, wrote humorous articles, and signed himself "The Man-in-the-Street." He also contributed to our poets' corner—a weekly effusion was expected from him, and generally composed while the printers were waiting—being the only really talented writer amongst us. Stringy used to be very ruthless with his scissors over these articles and poems, generally cutting away the points and best portions, and leaving them about as meaningless as the reviews, and causing the conscientious author to turn up the whites of his eyes with despair and walk out sadly.

"I'll have to discharge that duffer," Stringy used to say each week. "He grows longer winded and more meaningless each day. I can't teach him his trade, nohow."

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT THE COTTAGE IN WILLIAMSTOWN.

STRINGY BARK as an editor had a very simple and Napoleonic system of arranging his papers. First came his own leader, which was uncertain as to length, and altogether depended on the humour he was in for "slashing." He generally dashed it off in one sitting, and had it set up in the modern way, with lots of stars between each sentence. He didn't require much preparation for his work—a few names copied out at random from *Bourke's Peerage*, diversified with some of the personages abroad; these he took up in rotation, and straightway invented personal news about them of the most private and familiar nature. If it was a prince, or a reigning monarch, he would tell his readers some little incident which took place while he and his intimate friend the king were together, some particular good thing he had put His Majesty up to, and how grateful or ungrateful His Majesty had been afterwards, or he would contemptuously refer to a duke whom he was slating with,

"As I remarked at the time to old Mullagatawny, 'My dear Bob, it won't do at any price.'"

Stringy was rather proud, as he had a right to be, over these airy inventions, and as my duty was to be present during the writing of them, he used to electrify and delight me by reading them, par by par, as he knocked them off.

"This is rather smart, don't you think, sub?" then he would read it, and strike me almost speechless with admiration. "That's what I call journalism, Mr Stick-in-the-Mud," this to the poor Man-in-the-Street if he was present, and who, like myself, could only goggle at the little genius. "If you'd take a lesson from that par, you might do something in time. Go out and take a walk while you think about it."

"I shall dream about it," murmured the professional journalist; "it is more crushing than a nightmare."

When his own article was completed, he sent Niblet off with it and the other contributions to the printers, and then, when the proofs came back, pasted them into the pages. Sometimes his own matter ran to three pages or more; if so, then someone else had to be cut short. That someone generally was Mr Inkhorn, the poor "Man-in-the-Street."

"Can only give you half a column this week, Stick-in-the-Mud;" he had playful titles for the whole of us, mine was Slowboy. "You've got matter for one and a half here."

"Hand it over and I'll delete it to the right length in a few minutes," Mr Inkhorn would say nervously.

"Oh, no need for that; this is the shortest way to excise, here goes," Stringy would say calmly, measuring the proof with the space and clipping it off to the required length, utterly regardless of the weary groans of this much persecuted scribbler, who knew what he would have to listen to about meaningless rot after the paper had passed through the hands of the printers.

"Had to cut off three of your verses, Inkhorn, this week, and devil take me if I don't think the rest ought to have been cut out too, for I can make neither head nor tail out of what is left."

"I don't suppose you could," wailed the unhappy poet. "The three best verses, too!"

"Well, I'm no great shakes on poetry myself, Stick-in-the-Mud, but why don't you try to write so that someone could understand it. A fellow at the club last night said

that it was as great a mystery to get at as anything of Robert Browning's."

"If he had seen the three last verses perhaps it might have been made plainer to him."

"Do you think I'm going to make my paper a prize puzzle paper—put the conundrum in one week and the answer next?"

"'Twouldn't be a bad idea," gently insinuated the poet.

"Perhaps not, but we strike at higher game; look at my pars, everyone tells, don't they?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then try to make your next contributions after that sample—every verse complete in itself, that's my idea of good writing, whether it is prose or poetry."

Mr Inkhorn, the Man-in-the-Street, was a singular character. No one knew where he lived. He had been taken on in the first days of the *Diver*, by Mr Hardwake, because he was a strict abstainer, although no one could have guessed it to look at him, for he had the most bibulous face anyone could have drawn a moral from. He was very gentle in his manner, and bore his crosses like a martyr, and if he had only been given a little fair play might have raised the tone of the paper, for his articles were painstaking and subtle in their fine irony and delicate humour; their only fault was that they were beyond the editor and the rest of his staff, and were therefore properly despised and mutilated. But Inkhorn bore all this, along with the constant abuse, with a meekness and patience which was little short of marvellous. I had not been long in the office before I became much attached to him.

I was not very many hours in the office before I ceased to wonder at Stringy's pride and hauteur, when I saw the array of visitors he had and the way he was fawned upon and flattered. Even my own head was nearly turned at the adulation I received as sub-editor from all conditions of men and women, particularly the professionals, whose living depended greatly upon our favourable opinion, or who at least were morbidly sensitive to a single bad notice.

Actresses came in smiling their sweetest on the little autocrat, and laughing loudly at his coarse remarks, trying their hardest to keep him in a good temper and lure him on to give them a favourable notice, or at least to let them

alone in his amusement columns. He was invited to more suppers than he could have taken in a month, during my first day, by these sweet creatures, and languished upon as if he had been a millionaire. The actors and music hall singers also clapped him fraternally on the shoulders, and asked him out one after the other to take a bit of lunch or a bottle of fizz. Lion comiques who swaggered about Bourke Street like noble lords, in their fur collars and cuffs, came into that sanctum as meekly as did Inkhorn, and abased themselves as profoundly as did Niblet.

"This is life, sub, ain't it?" shouted the little fellow. "They'll do anything for me, both women and men—afraid for their lives to get my dander up."

Yes, I began to see that fear was a most potent lever to move the affections either in wild animals or humanity.

"There's a new piece on at the Theatre Royal to-morrow night which I want you to see. Come with me, and I'll show you how the press is respected. You'll get different treatment from the management now you are sub than when you were super, you bet."

That night, when I got home, I found Jessie had been busy, and had ready for me a nice supper. I told her all my experiences of the day, over which she laughed heartily.

"Stringy is a true colonial; only wants a start to beat creation. I must go and see him after he has found out about us. Did you have much to say to Mr Ovinus Hardwake?"

"Very little."

"He didn't ask you many questions?"

"Only one—if I knew who had written the letter."

"Sly fox! Did you see him open that letter?"

"No."

"Perhaps it was as well that you didn't. I'm going to take a letter of introduction to him also one of these days, when I can go out safely without being followed."

"Detective Smith followed me this morning up to the office."

"I know. He has been here to congratulate me on my marriage. He is coming to tea some night."

"Does he think it real?"

"Oh, yes. It looks too natural not to be. I told him that I had found out what James Walker was, and broke

with him at once. Any woman would, he said. Oh, I was frank with him; told him how you and I had met, and that I had picked you off the streets, as I knew he must have seen you there, how an old admirer of mine had got you your present billet. There's no use *lying* to a detective."

"Of course he came to fish you about Walker."

"Yes, that was his purpose; but I said that we had quarrelled that night in Little Bourke Street, when you saw me home, and that I had sent you up to give him back his presents at his own appointment. I didn't want to get him into trouble, but I wasn't going to get into any myself by keeping the presents of a bushranger. It was all quite natural and woman like, he owned, and went off, I think, satisfied."

"I am going with Stringy to the theatre to-morrow night," I said, after a pause. "Don't you think, now that the detective knows about us, that I had better tell him also to-morrow, and then you might come with us."

"Yes, that will be the best way, Luck, to get it all over as soon as possible. Show me about a bit and then they will leave me alone to do my work, for I feel impatient to begin. Every day now is like gold, for the net is closing round my chap, and I am in a fever of anxiety about him."

My present position with Miss Jessie Carew was an anomalous one, to say the least of it, something to make Mrs Grundy shudder and imagine all sorts of wickedness. In the eyes of Mrs Grundy I had ruined the reputation of Jessie Carew for ever, but then Mrs Grundy does not often go, if she ever does, behind the wings of a theatre, and at the present moment Jessie Carew was playing far too serious a stake to care one rap about Mrs Grundy and her opinions. She was playing for the life of the man she loved better than her own life or reputation, and then, having been in the green-room of a theatre, which Mrs Grundy hasn't, she knew that she could trust her fellow-actor, equivocal as the scene may have appeared to be to that staid old party Mrs Grundy in the boxes. We were good comrades, and no more, as actors and actresses can be sometimes, in spite of the world's opinions. I don't mean to say that I believe in platonism, for I don't. Had I felt the slightest sentiment for Jessie Carew as a woman I should have been a traitor in my heart to Captain Rainbow. Had she felt the slightest

interest in me beyond that I was the instrument to help him, then she would have been irrevocably lost as a woman.

How did we stand towards each other on this first night together as husband and wife? She had shown me plainly, in her explanation to Detective Smith, that she was utterly insensible as to how she placed me in his estimation. I was not even a personality to her in her aim; her heart and feelings were utterly wrapped up in the absent Walker, so that, although a keen enough woman ordinarily, she was at present too much engrossed to study my feelings, or even to be aware of her own selfishness. That was love pure and simple, the most utterly callous and selfish of human passions.

Let me try to analyse my own sensations. To all appearances I was a young man alone with and recognised by the world as the husband of a good-looking young woman, that is, if I had been a callous villain, she was in my power completely; if I had been a conceited villain, I might have tried to lay siege to her susceptibilities, and tried to interest her in me.

But we had both been behind the scenes of a theatre, where men and women mix with each other like brothers and sisters, or say artists with their models. We had been accustomed to be free and easy with each other on the boards, and we had no need to study each other in the slightest. The result being that she was no more to me than my sister would have been in her place, or rather what a young man in masquerade might have been. Of course Mrs Grundy would not be able to comprehend this, and I don't expect her or any of her crew to do so. To that lot it carries improbability in the face of it. Yet, I think, if any actor or artist reads this chapter they will be able to understand the position without much effort.

After dinner Jessie and I went out to do our shopping for the next day, that is, after I had helped her to wash and set away the dishes. She did the washing, and I did the drying, under her directions. A nice, clear, starlight night it was, and as we went from shop to shop I could see that the people looked at us with interest as a newly married couple, thinking, I suppose, that we were very well mated.

Then we came home to spend a quiet evening. Jessie had worked hard all day to make things comfortable, so that I found the logs ready to light. She had hired a boy that afternoon to chop up some firewood for her.

"You will have to get up in the morning, Luck, and break me some more."

That was the man's task, and I readily agreed to do it.

"Isn't this nice and homelike? If you were only Jim, instead of being Luck Mort," observed Jessie plaintively, as she spread herself out comfortably on the easy-chair, with her feet to the glowing logs, while I sat opposite to her, with my elbow on the table, the paraffin lamp near, and my tobacco pouch (she had provided me with that) lying filled alongside of the glass, which she had also mixed for me, my pipe in full glow, and myself lazily content.

Yes, it was homelike, if I had been Jim or she had been Sabina Condon. For the first time I began to dream of a possibility, so infectious is this sort of thing.

"Come here, Gyp, and comfort me."

Gyp, who had been lying on the hearthrug, enjoying the unaccustomed life of luxury, roused himself, and with a doggish protest, languidly shifted his position from the rug to her lap; then she stooped over him, and before I was aware of it, had burst out crying, making both me and Gyp decidedly uncomfortable.

"Oh, this life, this weary, hopeless life!"

"Don't, Jessie; I can't stand that, you know. Speak to me instead, speak to me about Jim, tell me all your plans, tell me about your own past life, but for goodness' sake dry up."

"You're a downright good sort, Luck, and it's too bad me breaking down like this," she said, sitting up and wiping her blue eyes. "But I couldn't help it at the moment; now I'm all right, and will tell you all about myself and Jim."

"Yes, do, there's a dear."

"You know, I suppose, that my father was a mate of Jim's—a bushranger also?"

"Yes, Jim told me about that."

"When my mother died, he put me into a convent near Melbourne; at least some good friends got me in, and there I stayed from six years up to fourteen, so that what I know I learnt from the little sisters.

"After that I went home to keep house for father. I didn't know what he was then. I thought he was a selector. It was only after I had been some time at home, that I discovered it. Before that time Jim had been amongst us, and won my heart right away from me, so that when I found

them both out I was in a manner prepared for it, and wasn't in a position to turn from my sweetheart when my father was as bad, nor from my father when my sweetheart was in the same boat; after that I just got into the boat with them both, and took an oar also.

"One night father and Dicky brought home Jim badly wounded, and left him with me to nurse up, which I did. If I didn't know my heart to its full extent before that time I found it out then. Before he was better I knew and he knew that there was only one man and woman for us. Law or no law, I didn't care what he was, or what he did, so that I might be allowed to live with him, or die for him. We'd have been married there and then, only he wouldn't, he was death set on making his escape and taking me to another country.

"Then they next brought the old man home with his death wound. He lived long enough to give me over to his mate, and since then Dicky and I have been with him, or working for him and for the one object of our lives, to get away if we can.

"Until you came on the scene we had no one to help us, for he hasn't got a man about him but would betray him if they thought he intended to give them the slip. You are different, for you are not one of us, and you are such a good sort that it isn't in human nature not to use you. Don't you see how it is, old man?"

Jessie smiled winningly upon me as she stretched out one hand towards me, which I took and pressed; her other hand was fondling my dog.

"I'll do all I can to help you both, Jessie."

"I know you will, Luck, and so does Jim."

"What are your plans about getting away?"

"Well, I intend to get acquainted with some ship captain down here, and interest him enough to get him to give a passage to America for my old father—Jim. You must keep out of the road of that arrangement. I expect I shall have to let the captain spoon on me a bit before I can persuade him to take a stowaway. I'm leaving that all to chance. Once we get him safe out of the country, Dicky and I can follow in the next ship. You have nothing to do with this, remember, only to go on as you are now doing."

"It seems a good idea. Have you got the disguise all prepared?"

Not yet, but I will. All must be worked very cautiously, for it isn't the police I'm so much afraid about as our own men. They are ten times more difficult to baffle than all the policemen in the world. Still, this marriage of ours ought to throw them off the scent. They are too wicked to give us credit for living as we are, and once they find this out they will never expect Jim to forgive me. That's where you come in so strong with both sides. Now, I think, we'd better get to bed."

At the door of her bedroom I said good-night to her.

"God bless you, Luck Mort, and send you happiness for this kind act."

Jessie snatched my hand up to her lips and kissed it passionately, then she glided within her own bedroom door.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE MAJESTY OF THE PRESS.

NEXT morning I rose up early, and after a good shower-bath and half an hour at wood chopping I was ready for the breakfast which Jessie had prepared. What a domesticated woman she would have been had fate only given her half a chance. Some women are not, but Jessie was born to adorn the cottage of an honest workman, for while she worked on, she forgot her pack of troubles and sang all sorts of odd snatches; but as the destined bride of a poetic and "bailing up" fugitive she was clearly a woman wasted.

After breakfast she accompanied me to town. She had to get a few odds and ends for herself, and "take out" for me my dress suit and other articles from the pawn, so that before going to the office I intended to call and settle what I owed at Mr Latour's, and get the duplicates from him which I had left.

Jessie looked a very pretty and coquettish young bride, with her fresh colour and her golden-brown hair, which broke from the natty little bonnet in rebellious tendrils. She was dressed in silver-grey, a fine blending of silk and merino, with a lace parasol, so that I felt rather proud to be seen in her company.

Gyp we left behind to guard the house, a task the little

scoundrel by no means relished, for he looked after us from the front room window with a very woebegone air and watery eyes ; he was not nearly so happy looking, now that he was once more respectable, as he had been while a homeless wanderer. He had hardly yielded to a smile since leaving Killmore. Some dogs have so little sense of dignity.

I left Jessie eating an ice at a confectioner's shop while I made my call at my old lodgings. They were all as I had left them. Mrs Latour, once more up and strong, still sat at the parlour table, refreshing herself with some oysters and a pint of stout. The baby Antonio had been christened, and was enjoying his *siesta* in a wickerwork cradle. Mr Latour was polishing the knives in the back kitchen, where Fernandez was preparing the dinner.

Nothing changed and nothing likely to change in that easygoing establishment. They were glad to see me, and to get their rent, and sorry to hear that I wasn't coming back to stay.

"The good ones no come back often, the bad ones never go away," observed Mr Latour, plaintively, as he gave me my packet of pawntickets. "Dat Sandy Macintosh with us still ; he come straight from gaol to me like a bad sixpence, and stop ever since ; he never rise now before night, and hardly ever pay anything, but for all dat he no go away."

I was glad to hear that Mr Macintosh was still in bed, as I had no desire to see him. Satisfied, also, that I knew his lair, I could now keep my eye upon him, for I felt he was worth watching.

"Does Stringy Bark ever come here now ?" I asked Mr Latour before we parted.

"Sometimes—not often. He's too big a swell now, but yet he comes when he has anything for Sandy to do."

I was startled to hear this piece of news.

"Does he employ Sandy Macintosh ?"

"Yes ; he has given him a job once or twice, and sometimes gives him passes to the theatres and music halls. What kind of work he does I don't know, but as these have been the only times that my lodger has paid me I suppose that he does some work for Stringy."

I had a dim notion of the work Sandy did for Stringy Bark, and went out of the coffee palace more resolved than ever to keep an eye on this enemy of mine."

I gave Jessie the tickets, and saying that I'd be home early that afternoon, left her to go about her mission of redemption, while I went on to my place of business.

During the forenoon I had a chance of breaking the news of my *marriage* to my little chief, greatly to his wonderment.

"Well, of all the gammies you are the gammiest, Slow-boy, to go and string yourself to a woman, when you might have had the pick of Melbourne if you had only hung on a bit and taken an example by me. Dash it, sub, you're an ass and no mistake!"

I admitted that I was.

"Not that the piece ain't good enough in her way—if she had only some tin to her back."

I told him that she had a few hundreds saved.

"Ah, that's better; only you might have got thousands if you had waited. Never mind, my boy, I won't turn my back on you for all that. Trot her out. Fetch her along to the theatre to-night, and I'll play her against some of my other ladies—make them jealous, you know. I suppose she hasn't forgotten how to dress herself, now that she has retired to domestic life. She used to show up well in the toggery line, if I remember right."

I informed him that I thought she would not outrage his gentlemanly instincts, and then he dismissed me to my desk with an air of wearied dignity.

"Damme if I mustn't have a holiday soon from this everlasting grind. I'm getting used up—regularly *blasé*, you know, sub—so many crawlers to interview, so much to see. I haven't had a good night's sleep for the last two months. Niblet."

"Yes, master."

"Fetch me a sandwich and a pint of Cliquot as quickly as your old pins can carry you there and back again."

I looked at the little hero attentively. He was certainly drying up under the fierce blaze of the sun of prosperity. True, there hadn't been much flesh about him during our first acquaintance, yet I was astonished that even he could look thinner. If he continued to decrease as he had been doing, it would not be long before a magnifying glass was required in the office to see him at all.

He was not nearly so interesting now with this new dignity and *blasé* air about him. His repartees, also, were

not so ready nor so graceful, and what had been enjoyable audacity before was insufferable arrogance and downright vulgarity now. There was too little of him to kick, yet every second remark which fell from his withered lips irritated me almost to madness. He no longer gloated over his smartness of doing people. He had lost his humorous cynicism, and only said ill-natured things, with a spiteful screech, while as for his wicked remarks to the fair sex they were no longer amusing. Clearly Voltaire redivivus was becoming old once more and degenerate.

I did not see much of Mr Hardwake on this second day. I saw him go into his room with a quick, nervous step and an uneasy side glance, as if someone was after him from whom he wished to escape each morning; then, after a little time, he came out again with some letters in his hand, which he gave to the editor to answer. He only darted one feline look at me as he passed my open door—a look of hatred, and, as I also thought, deadly fear.

“Mr Buttermouth asks for a delay in his payment this week, editor. He offers five hundred down and the rest by instalments. Can we give him a rest on these terms?”

“No,” replied Stringy promptly. “He is meditating a bolt, and only wants time to gather his cash all in. I have found out that. If you don’t nail him this week he will be on his road to California next week. Send him a message by hand, and demand an instant interview in the office, or he will dodge you. He is a slippery card, you know, governor, and like you, very religious.”

“Yes, we have been running the platform lately pretty close together. Well, write him to come at once. I’ll see him myself. The other matters are all right; they will pay down, so we may go to press early this week. Half a column will serve me for my financial article.”

Mr Hardwake turned from his small editor, and looked wearily from the window for a few moments, then he turned abruptly and, with another scowl in my direction, ran out of the room rapidly.

“Old Hardbake is within an ace of D.T.’s or I’m a Dutchman,” murmured the editor, stroking his chin reflectively with his shrivelled hand. “That’s the worst of those strict abstainers—when once they indulge, they don’t know when to stop.”

About lunch time Mr Buttermouth made his appearance in response to the mandate of his tyrant. He was a heavy and prosperous looking victim, with an unctuous air of sanctimony about him, which brought quite an atmosphere of respectability into the sanctum, although it was evident, in spite of his majestic air, that he had left a good deal of his dignity downstairs in his carriage.

"The editor, I presume," he observed, with a stately bend of his head and an ingratiating smile.

"Buttermouth—eh?" snapped Mr Stringy from his desk.

"That is my name—Mr Charles Buttermouth."

"Niblet!"

Again the awful scream sounded which had startled me so much.

"Here, sir!"

"See if Mr Hardwake is disengaged."

During the time the office boy was absent Stringy sat stolidly in his chair, reading letters, and allowing the merchant to stand with his hat in his hand, like an applicant for employment, and his urbanity oozing gradually away.

"Mr Hardwake is at present in his office, and disengaged," said Niblet, as he once more put his head into the door.

"Then show this party in to him," answered the editor sharply.

And so the wealthy man slunk after the office boy like a whipped cur. The small master never looked up at him, or even displayed any signs of triumph after he had left. It was this iron restraint which Stringy put upon his larikin inclinations which was drying him up, I now felt sure.

I watched the victim slouch along the passage, with stooping shoulders, after Niblet, without much pity, for I was sure that he richly deserved his fate, else he had not been there, and almost laughed when I heard Niblet, in response to the stern "Come in," open the door gently and say, "A party to see you, sir."

After the office boy had closed the door behind that now thoroughly demoralised merchant and philanthropist, he laughed for a moment, with his head down towards the keyhole, and then glided back to his paste pot, rubbing his hands gently and smiling to himself as if he thoroughly enjoyed his situation, as I had no doubt he did.

The interview was a long one inside that spider's web.

I could hear the voice of the victim occasionally raised in remonstrance or appeal, and a low, steady, drawling monotone in reply. Then the door opened and the two gentlemen came out together.

"Then I may reckon upon you being here sharp four o'clock, Mr Buttermouth," drawled our proprietor, with his nasal twang.

"Yes," groaned Mr Buttermouth, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Hot, ain't it, to-day?"

"Very," sighed the victim.

"You orate to-night at the Young Man's Christian Association, don't you?" said Mr Hardwake.

"Yes; a short address on social purity. Shall you be on the platform?"

"I reckon not to-night; I have a young woman's improvement class to tackle to-night, or else I should have been most happy. Good-day until four o'clock."

"Good afternoon."

With a limp handshake Mr Buttermouth crawled limply down the stairs, while Mr Hardwake went back to his lair, with the request as he passed to Niblet,—

"You may bring on my lunch now and a fresh bottle of three star."

At four o'clock punctually the merchant returned, followed by the cabman, carrying a weighty bag in his hands. Mr Buttermouth did not bring his own private carriage this time, and the interview was very short. When he walked out for the last time it was with a steady step, as if he had just got a disagreeable load off his mind and was resolved to push all thoughts of it from him.

I left the office as soon as I could that afternoon and hastened home to the little cottage. Jessie had dinner ready—a roast leg of mutton, with potatoes, marrow, and green peas, besides a delightful princess pudding. How she ever managed to get through her many commissions in town, brush and air my dress suit, set my long-silent gold repeater agoing to the correct time, sew the ornaments on her own dress, tidy up the place, make this dinner, and yet look fresh and cool, as if she had been resting all day under the verandah, is one of those mysteries which women may explain, but men never.

There she was, with her working dress, and over it a clean apron, ready to sit down and eat with me, as if she had never watched the boiling and the roasting; then after dinner, while I was taking my first smoke since breakfast time, she washed up the dishes and put the remains of the feast away for supper, then sitting down opposite to me, she declared that she was going to dress for Stringy Bark.

"The little wicked anatomy," she cried, laughing, when she heard his remarks about her. "No woman would be afraid of the mite, would they? No one would take him for more than seven; but he must be. Don't you think so, Luck?"

"Yes, I really do think that the naughty boy is more than seven," I replied gravely, upon which she laughed more heartily than ever. So little amuses two people when they are together and mean to make the most of it.

Jessie was not long behind me with her dressing—theatrical ladies don't take much longer than a man over their toilet, elaborate although it may be, and she had grown accustomed to quick changes during her short engagement at the pantomime.

"Will I do, Luck, even for that fastidious critic, your editor?"

She turned herself about for my inspection, and revealed to me the vision of a lovely woman perfectly dressed and wearing her finery with easy indifference.

"I am going to mash, to-night. Who knows but what my amiable skipper may be there? Every seafaring man I notice in the stalls I intend to look tender upon. I won't lose an instant of time."

"I suppose that means that I have to take perfect liberty, and do as I please, so that you are left alone?"

"Yes, Luck; your easy-tempered wife gives you every leisure to enjoy yourself the same as if you were a single man."

I had ordered a cab, so we drove all the way, and met the lordly Stringy in the vestibule. I have often wondered how his tailor could fit him so perfectly and make his clothes sit so easily with so little material at his disposal. There stood our editor, with a camelia bud in his buttonhole, the nattiest, daintiest, most withered little phenomenon in evening dress that could be imagined. He was like a rare black and white orchid, with some dewdrops trembling on the edges, the diamonds on his shirt front and fingers being the dewdrops, and the only large object about him being his eyeglass.

"The little darling!" murmured Jessie, in an ecstasy, as she saw him. "Isn't he a pink?"

As we came towards him he stuck the large pebble into his left eye and gazed over her critically.

"You'll do, Jessie, my dear; take my arm and I'll show you into your box."

"Won't you let me carry you up instead, Stringy. It would be no trouble, you know," whispered Jessie, as she stooped tenderly over him.

"Now you just stop that chaff here, Mrs Mort, and take my arm," he said in a low voice, looking at her fiercely.

"I'll try, old fellow; only stretch up as far as you can, or they'll think I am going in on my knees, and that wouldn't look dignified, would it?"

Whether it was the get up of Jessie, or the wonder who led her up the stairs on his tiptoes, I don't know, but our party attracted a good deal of attention on the way from the vestibule to the boxes. The visitors stood aside, staring, to let us pass, the attendants bustled in front of us, clearing the road as if we had been royal personages, and obsequiously opening the door of the best box for us.

"This way, sir, this way, madam, to the cloak-room. Happy to see you, sir, and your friend."

"My sub-manager," replied Stringy haughtily to the stage manager, who came forward eagerly to make us welcome. "Hope you have something worth showing us to-night?"

"Yes, I think you'll like our new piece, and our new star. I hope so, indeed."

"A bit of a stick, ain't she? I saw her at the office yesterday, and wasn't much impressed, I can assure you," replied Stringy in a freezing tone.

"Have a drink, old chap, do, and then come round to the back. See her before she goes on. She looks well in the green-room, I do assure you."

"Presently, presently, my dear boy. Must see the lady in first, you know."

After we had seen Jessie safely disposed, I followed my chief to the bar, where he condescended to drink with the nervous manager, then we made our way behind the scenes, and into the sacred green-room. I had never been within it before, and could only wonder at and admire the dauntless courage and composure of the little hero as he stalked

amongst the properties, keeping the drop scene from being raised, criticising the limbs of the ballet girls in a loud, shrill falsetto, intimidating the professionals, while they all cringed to him and applauded his wit.

I don't think that any of them recognised me as the despised super of a few weeks before. If they did they were too wise to let me know it. Following in his wake, I received nothing but winning smiles and meaning looks.

"That's what the press can do," observed Stringy majestically, as we once more found our way back to our private box.

I did not, however, enjoy the play quite so much as I had done when I used to see it from the gallery, for Stringy would utter his opinions in a voice loud enough for the Duke of Cambridge, also the actors and actresses would look most of the time in our direction, which made it embarrassing. Altogether I was glad when the act ended, and I could make my escape into the vestibule. But even here I was little better off, for, as it was a first night, Stringy took up his post in the most conspicuous place, and forced me to stand beside him as his sub, while he attracted the attention of everyone who passed of any standing, and claimed acquaintance with them whether they wished it or not.

Of course there were other and more legitimate representatives of the press present, who eyed the little upstart with disfavour, and who would have passed him without acknowledgment had he permitted this, but he would not. Every instant he sprang forward to buttonhole someone or other, and impudence generally carried the day.

"Show yourself, Slowboy. Stick up your head. One must be seen at first nights if they would be respected. That's why we all go, that's what first nights, and private views, and churches are made for." So I exhibited myself, and drank to the dregs the contempt we both received as frauds and blackmailers from the honest and legitimate critics, and what we so richly deserved. "Now for a drink," cried Stringy, when he had got this duty over. I followed him naturally into the bar, and heard him call for a drink—one drink only, though, for himself. He did not include me in the order, so I stood like a fool, not knowing whether to insult him by calling for mine or not, until he had tossed his refreshment off and remarked coolly, "We'll go back now and see how they are moving on."

"I'll miss this act, I fancy," I said gently. "I feel as if I wanted some fresh air."

"All right ; come back when you are ready," observed my chief as he strode away.

Clearly Stringy was not improving with prosperity.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SANDY MACKINTOSH GETS A COMMISSION.

FOR a month we continued our quiet life at the cottages, I going to my office regularly, and getting new insights into the business of blackmailing. As Inkhorn used to say, once a man enters the service of the *Diver*, he hangs up his coat of respectability and self-respect outside. There was no dignity in the business, only, as far as I was concerned, five guineas per week.

Jessie Carew did not pass her time in idleness, neither did her lover and his gang of desperadoes up the country. The papers were filled with accounts of their exploits, and the name of Captain Rainbow had by this time become a household word. If he meant to break from his evil companions, he at least intended to finish up his professional career with *éclat*.

The police, of course, were blamed severely, per usual, by the press, and yet, poor wretches, they were doing their level best to break up this formidable band of bushrangers, and capture the chief. Sent hither and thither on false scents by the paid agents, they were almost driven to death, without the ghost of a chance, until some traitor came forward to offer true information. As yet the traitor had not come forward, so that the police, being only mortal, were helpless.

I had received another letter from my friend in England, Mr Sampson. He was still looking after my interests, but things were in the same state as they had been before, neither better nor worse.

A regular number of letters I got from Sabina Condon, who had not forgotten me. In her last she told me that her mother was very ill, and excusing herself from writing much on that account, as she was helping to nurse the invalid.

Poor, sweet Sabina, her whole life seemed to be taken up with nursing.

Jessie never heard from her lover, and she didn't expect to hear, for he had given it out amongst his gang that she had deserted him and got married, so that they thought he would no longer have any inducement for leaving them, now that he had lost his sweetheart. When Jessie had all ready, she was to put a certain advertisement into the *Argus*, carefully worded. When he saw this, she might expect him on the third day of the insertion. Their plans had been all carefully arranged, and she was doing her part bravely.

It was in the early part of the fourth week that Jessie announced to me that her solitary walks had been successful. She had managed to hook her sea-captain, whose ship was then taking in cargo at Sandridge, and expected to be ready for sailing in a fortnight, so that she was making the best use of her limited time to entangle his affections, like the siren that she was.

No compunction for the poor skipper's feelings troubled this cruel-hearted girl; sailors, as a rule, love lightly, and often. If she could get him doating enough upon her to do her wish in the stowing away of her lover, that was all she at present cared about.

"You need not come home soon, Luck, at nights just now. He thinks I am living with my father and brother, but it will be best for you not to meet him until I have interested him far enough, so best dine in town for the present."

Thus I was left to my own devices more than formerly, and was therefore very glad to avail myself of the press free passes and attend the music halls and theatres.

One evening I had rather a funny adventure at Charley Whale's music hall. I had gone in to put off an hour, and hear a new singer who had been engaged. She was a pretty girl, evidently fresh to the profession, and not at all aware of the kind of audience she had, for she gave as her first song a sentimental ballad, which was not at all appreciated, and for which she got a few hisses and no encore, therefore she retired, a disappointment.

After her appeared the favourite of the evening, the celebrated Belle Buxton, who shook the house with her loud coarse voice, suggestive gestures, and lavish display of limbs. Belle was well known to them all; she could drink like a fish,

swear like a trooper, and was generally beloved by the gentlemen who came there to be amused, so that she was encored four or five times.

Now, a singer who cannot command an encore at a music hall is very promptly discharged, as of no further use, and this I knew would be the destiny of this young soprano singer. I was not at all sorry that it should be so, for her own sake, yet the fact of her being there at all made me a little melancholy.

"She will never get through the hall without being insulted," I thought, and a kind of chivalrous notion began to dawn in my mind that I ought to wait for her where I was and see the end of her performance. I might manage to protect her just a little by doing this.

As I was meditating in this fashion I suddenly saw my old enemy, Sandy Macintosh, come in with two or three other blackguards. I had met him before this at one or two places, but had managed to avoid any encounter with him, so now, partly to get out of his way and partly to see the soprano a little closer, and warn her of her danger, I made use of my special privilege as sub-editor and passed in behind the scenes.

Belle was there waiting on her turn, and nodded to me pleasantly enough; the young girl stood beside her, in a very dismal attitude, for the manager had just been rating her for her lack of ability to please, so that she was disconsolate.

I got into conversation with her easily enough, and heard her story. She had been on the stage in the provinces, and had come to Melbourne to seek for an engagement, and this had been the only one she could get.

"I'm very glad that I have been discharged. I'll never come again; this class of audience is too horrible."

I told her I thought she was wise, also that I might be able to get her into the theatre, for which she was very grateful. I also told her about her danger in getting through the crowd outside safely, and offered to see her to the door; this also she accepted gratefully.

She had two more songs to sing, one before and one just after Belle Buxton, after that the great lion comique might be expected to fill the stage, when she could get away, so I promised to wait for her at her dressing-room door (there was only one dressing-room for the ladies) in this limited stage.

At last her time was up, and she whispered that she would not keep me long waiting, and went inside to change her dress.

The lion comique was in full force, when the dressing-room door opened, and she appeared with her veil drawn over her face.

"Are you ready?" I asked, offering my arm, which she promptly took.

It was no easy matter for me to get through that half-intoxicated crowd with a woman; the remarks were very freely scattered about, also, as we pushed our way along. "She's got a new one to-night," etc., etc.

At last we reached the street in safety, when I said,—

"Stand here until I get a cab."

"I want a drink first, by George, and after that the jehu, if you like, chummy."

I started back as the young lady lifted her veil, with a hoarse burst of laughter, and disclosed the painted features of the hall favourite, Belle Buxton. I had made a mistake.

"You thought it was the young one, didn't you, chummy? Well, there, I won't be cross. Stand me a lush and go back again, you'll be in lots of time, for she wasn't half dressed when I left her."

I stood her the drink, and rushed hastily back to find I was just in time, and to run the same gauntlet over again. "Hang me if he ain't a greedy coon; he's taking them both with him."

I got her address, and a cab for her, promising to send her a letter from my chief to the stage manager of the theatre—I knew that I could ask that much from Stringy even in his present almost unapproachable state—and had turned back after seeing the cab drive away, when my glance fell upon our proprietor, Mr Ovinus Hardwake, muffled up in an overcoat, making his way furtively into the music hall, which I had just quitted.

"Hallo," I thought, "what does our respectable master want in there, and at this late hour?"

It was nothing to me, of course, what he did with his nights, and I was about to turn away and go home, when the same instinct which had prompted me to pick up the scrap of paper at the post office on the day Sabina's postal order was abstracted, made me pause irresolute now.

"I'll have a look at him first at anyrate," I thought, and once more I sought the door and passed in.

The lion comique was singing his third song, and the place was considerably crowded at the door, so that I could stand unnoticed behind the spectators and look over their shoulders.

After a little time I saw my man in front of me, looking about him keenly. Suddenly his eyes fell upon the party he was after, and I saw him edge his way slowly until he came to the table where Sandy Macintosh and his friends were refreshing themselves. When he came over to the side of Sandy, he touched him lightly on the shoulder, upon which the other glanced up and nodded to him, and then made a slow movement of rising. He was a heavy man, Sandy, and did not get up very quickly.

They were coming out together. Instantly I left the door and went into the street, where I took up my stand under a lamp-post at some little distance away. Under a lamp-post is the best place for not being recognised one can take in a public street, for you can see without being seen, unless those you are watching come quite close.

I had not been long in this position when I saw them come out and pass up the street, that is, Mr Hardwake went on in front and Sandy slouched a little distance behind. They had something to speak about that they did not wish anyone else to hear, therefore Mr Hardwake was leading the way to a secure place, and also he had no desire to be recognised along with his gaol-bird associate in the public streets.

I pondered deeply while I looked after them. Where was there so safe a place at this time of night as the office? Mr Hardwake was too cute a card to trust to the street, any of the free gardens, or public-houses. Besides, he had a character to keep up, and although he might have risked it by going into the music hall alone, yet as he was a member of the newly started Vigilance Society he could be excused where another man might have been scandalised. It is a very good thing to belong to a White Cross Mission, the Salvation Army, or a Vigilance Society if a man has propensities and tastes for diving under the surface of Vanity Fair now and then. He can both gratify his bohemian inclinations and be respectable at the same time. This is where the staid MacDugalite beats the reckless rake at this game of cards.

I felt as morally convinced that Mr Hardwake would not lead his follower into any public-house, when the deserted office was so handy, nor speak to him in any public place, as I was sure that some special rascality was on the tapis, and with Sandy Macintosh in the council, I felt extra anxious to make a third and unseen witness.

I'll risk the office, and get there first, I suddenly determined, and with a rush I crossed the wide street and darted on ahead of them as fast as my long legs could carry me. It was nothing for a man to walk fast so late at night, and I had plenty of time, at the rate I was now going, to get there before them, let myself in with my own latch-key, and conceal myself in my own office until they arrived, if my conjecture proved to be correct; if not, I'd be just where I was before, and would have to wait for further developments.

If they did come to the office, would the proprietor take the burly scoundrel into his own room? No, his safe was there, and since that chloroform experience he would not be likely to lead that man into the way of temptation. He would take him into the editorial sanctum, where there was nothing to carry away except a few books, not as yet reviewed.

In a few moments I had reached the outer door of the office, inserted my key, and let myself in quietly, then slipping upstairs, I had time to get under my own desk, and behind a pile of loose papers and magazines, also to get cooled down, before I heard the key turn in the lock and the two men came up.

Mr Hardwake did as I supposed he would do, entered Stringy's department, pulled down the venetian blinds, and closed them firmly before he lighted the gas, and then barred the top stair door.

"Sit down, Sandy."

"Hope you have got something to drink on the premises?" growled Sandy as he obeyed.

"I have something in my pocket," returned Mr Hardwake. "The glasses are here."

He took from his greatcoat a bottle of brandy, and placed it upon the table, then pulling the corkscrew from his pocket, he said,—

"Draw the cork while I get the water-bottle and glasses."

I heard the cork come out with a sharp click, and knew that Mr Hardwake had taken the glasses from the little

corner china cabinet where Stringy kept them ; next I heard his chair creak as he sat down upon it, then the gurgle of the liquid as it was poured into the glasses. An eloquent pause followed this operation, succeeded by a deep-drawn breath, which announced to me that they had imbibed.

"Well, what is the present business, Hardwake, on hand?" I heard Sandy say after that pause.

"Not a big job for you and your companions, although I guess the pay will be pretty good if you manage it successfully. You know who my sub-editor is, don't you?"

"Yes, damn him," growled Sandy savagely.

"A very good sentiment that one, I reckon, for he is a meddling fellow, I will allow ; let's drink to that sentiment, and—damn him."

The glasses once more clanked before they were emptied, and then the Yankee continued,—

"Do you know that he has got married since you saw him last, Sandy?"

"No, and I don't care if he has."

"Yes, he has got married, and lives now in a little out-of-the-way cottage in Williamstown. Do you know much about Williamstown?"

"My mates do, if I don't."

"Well, I want you to crack that little crib some night, and bring all the papers and nick-nacks you may find there to me. What money you find, and they have some, you can keep to yourselves ; besides, if you bring me what I want, I'll pay you over and above one hundred pounds."

"What do you want particularly—letters?"

"Yes, I want to have that young man in my power. Bring all the letters you can find, his wife's also. She has been in the theatre, and I want to find out all about her."

"Love letters and that sort of thing?"

"Yes; you needn't bring her clothes, you know nor his, but anything like tokens or disguises that you find in the pockets and lining, or about the house. Bring them all to me, locks of hair, you know, disguises, wigs and that sort of thing—yes, bring all the *wigs* away that you can *find* in that house."

"You're most particular about the disguises—eh?"

"Yes, Sandy, I may as well be plain with you in this matter. It's a bit of private detective work I am on at present ; that young woman was formerly the accomplice of

the bushranger Captain Rainbow, and I've a notion that I'll find enough in that cottage to enable me, with some information which I have already, to capture this notorious bushranger, and so take a rise out of the police. You see I deal frankly and fairly with you. You can't do it yourself for you have not got the information. I can't manage, with my information, unless I get some of his disguises, which I am sure that young woman has with her."

"The reward is five hundred pounds," growled Sandy discontentedly.

"And I offer you one hundred for your share, with all you can take out of that cottage. I know that she has over a thousand pounds, if not more, about her in hard cash—which will make you better off than me in this affair. Now, will you take my offer and earn another hundred, for a few useless letters and—wigs, etcetera?"

"Yes, if the clink is there, as you say."

"I know it is. Now, I leave all the details to be worked out by you and your friends. Go down and prospect the place at your leisure. Luck Mort is generally out late most nights; I'll see that he is put on theatre duty more than ever. Find out the habits of his wife. I expect she will go with him sometimes, so I don't suppose you will have any trouble. There, I reckon that's all I want with you for the present. Come here and let me know when you have done the job."

Sandy rose at this dismissal.

"Have another drink, Sandy, and then I'll let you out."

As they went down the stairs together I crept out from behind the papers, for I was stiff with my uncomfortable position, and had no longer any fear of being discovered; so I stood up within the shadow of the door, satisfied that my time had not altogether been wasted.

What a ghastly face Mr Ovinius Hardwake had when he returned to put out the gas. I saw him rush over to the brandy bottle and gulp down two large doses, without stopping longer than the pouring of it out.

"They must have *it* with them, or else they'd never have come here to torment me. Let me but get it once more in my hand and I'll clear out from this cursed place next mail."

With a quick motion he shut off the gas, and rushed from the office as if the devil was behind him, leaving me to follow at my leisure.

CHAPTER XXVII.

STRINGY BARK FALLS A VICTIM TO CUPID.

"So that is Mr Ovinus Hardwake's little game, is it?" replied Jessie, when I reached home and told her what I had listened to. "I am glad to hear it is no worse at present, for I knew that I have been shadowed for the past night or so, and feared it might be the police still at it, and not quite over their suspicion. Now that I know it has been Mr Hardwake's prospecting, I don't mind humouring him a little. Let us give him every facility for robbing us; he will not find what he wants."

"What does he want so badly, Jessie?"

"What my sweetheart wants, and deserves a thousand times better—a fair chance to get clear of Port Philip Heads."

"It seems an easy matter for him to leave his office and go on board the first outward bound packet. He has money enough, I am sure, raking in the thousands as he does."

"So he has, and so have many old 'lifers,' who would give gladly a large fortune to go a voyage, but can't, nor can he, unless I give him permission, and that he will pay dearly for after his attempt at robbing comes off. I was inclined to be content with what we had already taken from him, but now I mean to punish him properly. He shall have to disgorge a considerable amount of his unlawful earnings before I can overlook this last Yankee attempt at smartness."

"What is the power you have over him?"

"Never you mind, Luck, old fellow—it's a secret—the same sort of power which has made him a rich man in such a short time. He fossicks about and finds out some things which other rich men wish to hide. We have fossicked, and found out his secret sin, that's all; what it is you had better not know, unless you wish to be an accomplice, which you don't want, and which we don't want you to be, for you are too good a chap, Luck, to be able to play at the games I have to play now."

There was a mingling of hopeless pathos and fierceness about Jessie, as she explained herself, that touched me curiously. She had all the instincts and yearnings to be straightforward and honest, but love and circumstances were dead against her.

"To save my Jim I'd willingly do far worse things than I am at present doing, God forgive me, and use far dirtier tools. He must be saved this time, no matter the cost of it, and the time is drawing so near that I feel almost mad with anxiety and dread. Yes, we'll go to the theatre to-morrow night, and give the skunks the chance they want. We'll take Gyp with us also. I can hold him on my knees all the time of the performance, for we mustn't risk his precious life. Tell Stringy that you are going to take me, and ask him to join us. His awful audacity amuses me better than the drama, and may make me forget for an hour or two this fearsome load which is weighing on my heart. Four days now, Luck, and it will be over."

"Have you put your advertisement into the *Argus*?"

"Yes, I did it to-day; the day after to-morrow he will see it, wherever he may be at present, and two days after that he will be here, that will be Friday night. Everything is prepared, and the vessel sails on Saturday morning, so that he must be aboard a little after midnight."

"Have you your money all safe, Jessie?"

"Yes, with the exception of a couple of hundreds. I have given the lot to the captain of the vessel to keep for my *father*. He is a decent fellow, this skipper, and has been very modest in his attentions—God bless him, although I never can—not much kissing, you know. I couldn't stand much of that just now; and he is too greatly awed with my grand dresses—thinks me a kind of duchess who has condescended to be spooney on him—and is more conceited over his conquest than heart-struck, I do believe."

"Poor captain, when he finds out his mistake."

"He never will. Jim is clever enough to play the obliged father all through the voyage. Then, long before the sea-captain comes back to Melbourne, the sea breezes will have blown the love fever out of his blood, so that by the time he comes here and finds no Jessie Mort to meet him he will console himself with someone a great deal better—all sailors are alike—so don't waste too much pity on him, or you will unmove me when I need my courage the most."

"Poor Jessie!"

"That's better, Luck, but not what I want either, just now."

"What have you told him about your *father*?"

"I told him that he was a merchant in Ballarat, who

has gone wrong with his affairs, through unfortunate speculations, and hasn't the heart, *at his age*, to face his creditors, so wants to clear out. That story won his sympathy at once, and made him eager to help, particularly when it was to oblige me. I've asked him to tea on Thursday, when you'll be introduced."

"That's press night."

"I know. We are going to the theatre together after tea, so that I shall bring him back to supper, and keep him till you come home; it gives you just time to see him and speak a few words, not long enough for that tell-tale face and conscientious tongue of yours to make a mess of it. There, you see, I am candid with you."

"Yes; I wouldn't make a good conspirator."

"No, you've had no need to practise the art, Luck, and I trust you never may."

Next day I took the chance, while Mr Hardwake was in the room about something, to ask Stringy if he would join my wife and I that night at the theatre.

"No, my dear fellow," Stringy replied; "I've seen enough of the piece that is on at present, and of your good lady as well. She's a fine woman, I will admit, and suitable to you, I don't doubt, or you wouldn't have taken her as a life companion; but to my taste she's just a little bit *too fleshy*—not quite *spirituelle* enough, you know. Ah, my dear boy, I don't want to damp your ardour, but you are to be pitied, having a woman like that hung on to you for life."

"Why so, chief?" I asked, feeling amused. I wouldn't have been, perhaps, if Jessie had really been my wife.

"She'll run to fat, sub, or I'm no judge of women—grow as fat in a few years as the favourite of a Turk. By Jove, she will! and ain't that disgusting for a man to contemplate? Uch! where would a man like me be alongside of a porpoise like as Mrs Mort is sure to be in a few years' time?"

"Ah, that's a far-off contingency, Stringy," I replied, laughing at the little chap's face of horror.

"Not so far off as you think. Women are like melons in this colony, they ripen fast, I can tell you."

"But, then, I'll get used to it by degrees; besides, I am rather of the Mussulman's opinion about these matters."

"Oh, everyone to their taste, of course; she's not mine, by a long chalk."

"I'm glad of that, or where would I be?"

"Dash it! Slowboy, I believe you are trying to chaff me! Don't try that on, for I won't stand it, you know. Go and enjoy yourself as you like with Mrs Mort. Go to the devil if you like with Mrs Mort, but be respectful to your superiors."

The little man was decidedly angry this morning. Mr Hardwake had left us at the beginning of our conversation with his usual haste, but without looking in my direction, so that I hastened to soothe down his rage as well as I was able, and to finish the effect, sent out Niblet for a bottle of iced champagne. Then he became more amiable after the first glass or two, and favoured me with his ideas of the beautiful in woman.

"You are an awful fool, you know, Luck Mort, but some fellows are born so, and therefore can't help it. Now, there's that girl who is just beginning to make her name under my nursing—Rosalind Longford. That's a girl with a proper figure; it won't run to fat. In fact, it's not likely to run long to anything, for she'll go out some day like the snuff of a candle, and that's the best thing a girl can do as long as she's young. She's intense, that girl is—mesmeric, *spirituelle*—just my idea of what a woman ought to be. And she has good cause to be grateful to me for what I've done for her."

For the past few weeks Stringy had been praising up this young actress in a most fulsome style.

"I discovered that girl. I saw her in her embryo state, sub, and made her. Don't you see how the other papers are taking notice of her since I began to write about her talent?"

"Yes. How are you getting on with her?"

"Rippingly as far as she is concerned. I believe she is fascinated, poor devil; but hang me if we can get a chance for being alone together—you've seen her here always with some sheep dog or other."

"Yes, I have noticed that she doesn't come alone."

Miss Rosalind, in her visits, I fancied, had been always particularly nervous about being left, even for a second, alone with the little ravisher; in fact, when out with my editor, if she chanced to meet us, and was by herself, she made all sorts of pretexts to keep me from leaving them to themselves. But I dare not suggest this to Stringy, for he was evidently just a little touched with this stage neophyte, who had seemingly no wish to make an enemy of him.

"She can't, by Jove, and that is what is annoying us both at the present time. She says she is awfully sorry, and all that sort of thing, and I believe her. Any man would where I was concerned, but she lives with an aunt, who is a perfect dragon for watching her—highly connected, you know, in the old country—noble family, but hard up, so has to be particular. I've made appointments with that girl till I'm nearly sick, and she has kept them, too; but always someone or other turns up just as she is stealing off to meet me, and comes with her. I've tried all sorts of dodges to get her by herself, and I'm good at that, you know. She has tried all sorts of dodges to meet me alone, but we are always defeated by some bungle or other—it's cursed fate, that's what it is."

There was no mistake about it, Stringy Bark was at last in love, and as usual in such cases, was as blind as a mole. This was the cause of the "drying up" process which was going on with his parched anatomy, Rosalind, like the Secuba of Balzac, was fast making a dried worm of him. She had already extracted his wisdom teeth, and now only his vanity remained, with about as much moisture as a half-withered bean might possess. Niblet's garden was already beginning to go to seed.

"Have you tried her with presents?"

"Confound you, stupid, what do you take me for, that you try to teach your grandmother to suck eggs? Do you think I have lived to this mature age and yet not know the way to win a woman? Presents, by jingo that girl has a portmanteau of jewellery which I have bought for her, if she has one article. I don't mind telling you in confidence, Luck, now we are on the subject, that large as my salary is in this office, and heavy as are the extra commissions, I'm at the present moment head over in debt for presents to that remarkably shy, yet grateful young aristocrat."

Poor little house-worm, he was getting drier than even I expected.

"Of course they'll all come back again, when once I get the chance of popping the question, for, as I have said, she is grateful and fascinated, so that it is only a speculation. I'm getting on well enough now, and mean to raise myself in the ranks—get into the sacred circle of the upper ten—and this is my chance, cut and ready for me, don't you see, duffer?"

Yes, I saw, and wondered how even resuscitated Voltaires may sometimes become fools where a woman is concerned. Alas! what had the festive larikin grown into?

"Now, that reminds me, sub, you may be able to help me a little. I will look in to-night, for a minute or two, and take you round to the green-room. You must try to engage the attention of the dragon for a short time, and give me a chance to wire in. I know Rosalind will be grateful to you if you manage this artfully."

I promised to do my best to help him with his courtship, since it was an honourable one, and returned to my desk and magazine reading, once more the best of friends with him, while he went out to secure a new bracelet, which he had heard Rosalind and her aunt speaking about the night before. I now began to comprehend the apparent meanness of my editor about that drink at the theatre bar. He was obliged to economise, even in small things, now that he was trying to win a place in aristocratic circles.

Jessie and I went to the theatre that night. She had told her captain that she was going to a private party. We took Gyp along with us, who, I must say, behaved very well, considering that it was his first visit to the play. He looked terribly bored, of course, with the performance, and yawned a great deal, but finally gave it up as hopeless nonsense, and retiring under Jessie's chair, slept the rest of the evening, with an occasional short yelp and groan. I suppose he was dreaming about hunting—yelped when he got the scent, and groaned when his prey had escaped him.

Stringy Bark was not very successful, even with my help. He got two minutes with the young lady, in a corner of the green-room, while I engaged the attention of the watchful aunt at the other end, but only long enough to present his bracelet and put it on, for, while Rosalind was still loudly expressing her admiration of it, and she was very lavish at that, the call-boy yelled her out of the room.

"Sold again," snarled Stringy, grinding his teeth. "But my time will come; let's have a drink."

He actually stood the drinks this time, and gulping his down, stalked gloomily out of the theatre, with his hat jammed over his eyes.

Of course, as we expected, Messrs Macintosh and Co. had visited our cottage during our absence, and made a fine litter,

which took us an hour or two to tidy up in the morning, and so forced us to rise early.

"Mr Hardwake will have to pay sweetly for this mess. Shouldn't wonder if he had been here with them," observed Jessie quietly, kicking aside the dresses which lay scattered about. "So I don't grudge him the few trifles he has borrowed. I'll pay him a visit to-morrow."

Thursday was our busy day at the office, when Stringy used his choicest language towards his subordinates; but on this day he was wearied and dejected. The reaction from hope to suspense had set in, and left him enervated and unfit to tackle the Peerage, so, instead of yelling out his orders to Niblet, he came into my office, and leaned dejectedly against the doorway, looking at me with lack-lustre eyes, his large eye-glass dangling idly against his watchguard.

"It's getting too much for me, this cursed Fate," he answered. "I've gained her affections, of course, but as to getting within a mile of her mortal structure seems past even *my* brains."

"Cheer up, old chap; these things all are by-chances; faint heart never won fair lady," I said, repeating the usual stale platitudes.

"Faint heart be blowed! I'll tell you what I'm determined to do, if that she-dragon don't leave us alone, or die soon, and that is, carry her off and drown her in the bay. A few more of her meddlings and she's a goner, that's what she is."

He looked gloomily at me for a few moments, and then returned to his writing-table.

It is an ill wind which blows nobody good, they say. This day of mental depression to our editor proved to be a golden day to the Man-in-the-Street. His contribution was an extra long one, yet it was not abridged by a line. His poem was inserted complete, so that the few club readers could at last make some sense out of his intention; more than this, he was set to work to fill up an extra column, for Stringy could run to no more that day than half-a-dozen venomous pars.

"Has my favourite scarlet turned colour?" murmured the office boy, as he missed the familiar tocsin. "It seems like it, or perhaps the late drought has made it droop. Let us pray earnestly for rain—a little shower at least."

About eleven o'clock Jessie turned up as fresh as a daisy,

and after a few airy remarks to the miserable Stringy, asked to see the proprietor.

"He can't see anyone to-day, Mrs Mort; this is his busiest time."

"Oh, I think he will see me, only for a moment; ask him through the tube, and mention my name."

The answer came back promptly, and loudly enough for us all to hear, "Send her along."

It was an ungracious answer, and uttered in such savage tones that I started up, thinking she might want my assistance in the lion's den, when she said sweetly,—

"Oh, I can manage this animal quite easily, Luck, my dear; don't disturb yourself, I shall be back presently."

Her interview with the "moral scavenger" of Melbourne wasn't long, certainly, and when she left him she came out alone and trippingly, floating into the editorial sanctum like a white butterfly, in her muslin dress and silk gloves.

"Do you know you are not looking well, Stringy, this morning?"

"I know it, and what's more, I don't feel well," snorted Stringy from his table.

"I know the cause also—Love—for Luck has told me about your troubles, and perhaps I may help you with the young lady if you are extra nice, even although you did call me fat. Am I very fat?" she asked plaintively.

Then she moved slowly round before him, as if on a pivot, as she asked the question, while he put up his big eyeglass and looked her over with a ghostly semblance of his old audacity.

"Not yet, my dear, but you shall be, most oppressively fat, by Jumbo."

"What a little caricature you are, Stringy Bark, to be sure," replied Jessie coolly; then turning to me, she said, "Oh, by-the-bye, I forgot, Mr Hardwake is waiting to see you. Luck, leave me to advise your editor on his love affairs, and go in to your proprietor. I'll wait for you here, and then we can all go to lunch."

When I entered the room devoted to Mr Hardwake I found him sitting at his desk, with his chin on his hand, and his back towards me. He did not turn as I closed the door, so I said,—

"You wished to see me, Mr Hardwake?"

"Yes, Mr Mort, I have just seen your wife, and am interested in her ; she is a nice girl."

Still, with his back turned towards me, and uttering the words in a hard, drawling monotone, I did not reply, so he continued,—

"I am very well pleased with you, Mr Mort, as far as you have gone on, and to show you that I approve of you, will raise your salary this week and after it, to ten guineas instead of five."

"Thank you, sir, this is indeed kind."

"Not at all. I think, also, that you should take a holiday with your young wife. Sydney is a pretty place, and you would enjoy a visit there—salary to go on per usual."

"No, sir, I could not think of it ; I have got over my honeymoon."

"We can spare you for a week or two easily from the office, so you had better take this chance while you have it."

"Have you suggested this to Mrs Mort, sir?"

"No." He turned round quickly in his chair, and looked at me for the first time, his back now to the light. "I have nothing to do with Mrs Mort. I advise it for your own health. Will you take my offer, and go?"

"No, thank you, Mr Hardwake. I have had enough of holidays lately. I want to stick into business now."

"Then, curse you, get out. Go back to your desk, and leave me alone. I am tarnation busy this morning."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CAPTAIN RAINBOW APPEARS.

AFTER my knocking about lately, I didn't mind in the least being anathematised by my employer, nor the vindictive scowl either that he gave me as I withdrew from his presence. In that office, where we were hourly consigned to the lower regions, a mandate of the sort more or less did not matter much, for since we had left our manhood and dignity outside, the rest came quite natural.

But I did consider a little upon his advice about my health, and knowing the man a little better since hearing

his conversation with Sandy Macintosh, I thought it well worth laying close to my heart.

"I must get a Colt's revolver this afternoon," I said to myself as I passed along the lobby. "It will be better as a preventive in this feverish atmosphere than a cake of camphor."

I found my editor considerably brighter under the influence of Jessie than he had been when I left them together.

"I have just been telling this disconsolate Romeo here that I'll be a Father Lawrence and the nurse rolled into one for him if he is a good boy and will leave his affairs in my hands. Now, Stringy, do you still think I'll run to fat in my middle age—eh?"

"You're a fine woman now, at anyrate," responded the once more hopeful lover, gallantly blowing a kiss towards her, "and may escape that awful fate by becoming a favourite of the gods—"

"And dying young. Perhaps you are right, Stringy, who knows? Well, better to die young than live yearning. Come, take me out to lunch—to Gunter's, for I want a good one to-day."

I am glad to say that Stringy Bark was on his best behaviour during our lunch at Gunter's, nay, more, he was *almost* gentlemanly. He did not shout out to the waiters so as to be heard all over the room, or curse at them when they brought him what he wanted, as was his wont; he gave his orders quietly, and said "Thank you," after he was served, in a way that was very comforting.

Perhaps the reason for this was that at the next table to ours a very wealthy squatter was seated, who did what Stringy had been accustomed to do—bawled out his orders, grumbled loudly, and made his parvenuism and wealth apparent to everyone. He was a large made man, with a very strong and brassy voice, which rendered it rather trying to sit within ten yards of him, while his importance so disgusted the little critic, who had lately been aspiring to caste, that he said, not realising the exaggerated mirror held up to him, "Ain't that a disgusting beast of a cad, sub?" which remark so tickled us that both Jessie and I laughed heartily and long, so heartily, indeed, that my editor ended in joining in himself, satisfied that he must have made a more than usually witty remark, although he could not quite see where it came in.

While we were still sitting watching this gilded wool-gathering parvenu going through what he considered his lordly manœuvres, that is, scooping up his soup with his spoon, holding it on high before letting it drop like a waterfall into his plate again, to mix the grease more thoroughly, as he told the cringing attendant in resonant tones, to show that he was the most moneyed man in the room at that moment, and was used to something better than they could give him at this place; while we were amusing ourselves at the expense of this colonial upstart, and trusting that the example might not be lost upon our larikin, Detective Smith entered, and seeing a place vacant at our table, came over and sat down beside us.

"Well, my turtle-doves, still enjoying your prolonged honeymoon? If you don't have a shindy soon, you'll convert us all into married men—eh, editor?"

"No! for this humble bee, Teck Smith. I prefer to gather honey from every opening flower, as the hymn bids us; that's my delight," replied Stringy mendaciously.

"Oh, Stringy, my infant, how you will be punished for that lie," cried Jessie sadly. "See already how quickly the Fates reward perjury?"

She touched him lightly on the arm, and pointed to the open door, through which Miss Rosalind Longford was sailing in all her glory, and accompanied by a young gentleman, but otherwise unguarded by any she-dragon.

"By Jupiter, I'll have that fellow's blood!" shouted Stringy, starting furiously up, with his table knife in his hand. "That's the sixth time he has come between Rosalind and myself, and it will be the last, I swear."

"Don't swear rashly, editor, and don't slaughter the poor fellow while I am here," answered the detective, pushing the jealous Stringy into his seat again. "He is a professional, so you can slay him in a more tidy fashion than with that dinner knife—dig into him with your pen."

"By George, I shall. Let's hurry up the lunch, and get back to the office, sub. I've got matter enough now for a few more slashing pars."

"That's best, my boy," said Jessie; "only, wait a little longer. They are sitting down, and I want you to introduce me to the lady as we pass out. Who knows but I may be able to make this the chance you have been so long looking for."

Miss Rosalind and her companion sat down at a small table near the door, so that they did not observe us. She had only dropped in for an ice, and while she sipped it leisurely and listened to her companion, who was rather a fine-looking young man, Stringy glared at them both savagely, and forgot altogether to put up his eyeglass.

Presently we finished our repast, and bore down upon the couple just as they were about to rise. I saw a mingled expression of confusion and vexation cross the fair face of the actress when she was accosted by our leader. This, however, she controlled instantly, and replaced it by a melancholy smile.

"How do you do, Mr Bark?" she observed, giving him her lily fingers, laden with his gift-rings, to press. "So glad to meet you; and how are you, Mr Mort?"

Stringy smothered his impatience, and introduced Jessie, so that together we passed into the street, chatting in a general way.

It was not very long before artful Jessie managed, in spite of all the efforts of Rosalind, to get her companion and myself in front, while Stringy had five delicious moments with his charmer. Of course he could not say much in the open street, but he did not neglect his opportunity; and as we kept persistently a few yards in advance of them, she was forced to do her own fencing with her dauntless little antagonist, consequently, when at last we parted at the corner of the street, for both Rosalind and her actor friend suddenly remembered that they had to go back to a rehearsal, Stringy was in a high state of jubilation.

"You are an angel, Mrs Mort, and if it wasn't that I was so blooming hard up at present I'd buy you a diamond ring straight off."

"Never mind the diamond ring, Stringy. I'll wait for that until you are spliced. I hope you got on all right?"

"First-rate. She is going to meet me to-morrow if she can manage it. That young duffer is set on to watch her by her confounded aunt, so she has to be careful; but she *thinks* she'll be able to slip away alone to-morrow."

"To-morrow I am looking forward to also for a treat," answered Jessie. "I hope we shall both be successful."

"See your wife to the station, sub, and come back as soon as you can. I'll read you that spy's death warrant when you return. Meanwhile, ta-ta, fair dame."

When we were once more together, I told Jessie the result of my interview with Mr Hardwake, and she quite agreed with me that I should purchase a revolver.

"I'll go with you, Luck, and pick you out a safe one, and also get one for myself, for that man is fit for anything, so we must be prepared."

"Was your interview a satisfactory one, Jessie?"

"Thoroughly. Mr Hardwake never disputed my right to negotiate with him. He had been at the cottage, and knew perfectly well that he was bluffed and must temporise. It was only the terms which caused any discussion between us, but that also was quickly settled."

"According to your own ratio?"

"Yes. When one has got a rat like that in a trap they are not inclined to be moved to compassion by his squeaking. If he had got what he was after at the cottage last night we should have been in his power to-day. But, as we stand at present, providing that we succeed to-morrow night, *The Financial Diver* will have to put its shutters up in less than a month from now, and your bold editor once more be reduced to private life, while you, Luck, old fellow, may have to try the diggings. If all goes well to-morrow night Mr Ovinus Hardwake will pay for his leave to travel five thousand pounds in gold a fortnight after this; if it doesn't—ah, then, someone will have to hang besides my Jim."

Jessie spoke in a low tone, and looked quietly enough at the passers-by as she uttered those words, but I knew well that behind that stillness raged a volcano.

When we went into the gunsmith's shop my companion proved that she knew both how to judge the merits of a revolver and to use one as well. She took a selected assortment into the shooting gallery behind the shop, loaded and fired off each of them with a firm wrist and steady aim which seldom missed the mark.

"That's the most serviceable weapon for you, Luck," she said, handing me a plain short-barrelled bulldog. "It will go easily inside your coat pocket, without bulging out too much, and is good at thirty feet. You don't want a pistol any further off than ten yards, as a rule. I'll take this one."

Her weapon looked like a toy, but it was double the price of mine, and yet was only plain ebony and blue steel, with-

out a single ornament about it, while the cartridges were not much larger than a pipe shank.

"This is what they call the ladies' ear-piercer. It doesn't leave much of a mark behind, but in a steady hand like mine it is very effective. Now, old fellow, go back to your office, and keep your eyes about you as you come home to-night. However, I don't think you will be in any danger while this moon lasts; it is almost at the full now, more's the pity."

Stringy was in fine form when I got back, for he had annihilated his enemy in half-a-dozen pars, and somewhat curtailed the extra article of the patient Inkhorn. Therefore, when we went in a body to superintend the printers and go over proofs, he stood drinks all round, and a little before midnight we parted, so that I was fortunate enough to get a car and drive down to Williamstown. It was a bracing drive, under that almost full moon, along the flats, with the ocean breeze freshening me up after the hot printing-room. We saw one or two drunken sailors reeling towards their ships as we neared home, but no one to interrupt us.

Jessie had hired a piano on our first coming, and I could hear that she was charming the ears of her amorous captain as I got up to the gate. When I entered, he was leaning over her in a most respectful yet devoted manner, trying to turn the music. A bluff, honest-looking man of about forty, and evidently very proud of his conquest.

"My brother, Luck Mort—our friend, Captain Dawes," said Jessie, rising from the instrument and introducing us.

We shook hands together awkwardly, and while Jessie was placing the supper on the table I took the opportunity to thank him warmly for the service he was going to do us.

"Don't mention it, Mr Mort. I'd do a great deal more than that for your sister."

After supper we walked with him back to his boat, not very far distant, and were rowed by him over to his ship; a delicious sail under that warm moonlight, but which I did not notice as much as I should have done had I not been thinking about the next night. That moon was very lovely, with the silver lustre it cast upon the waves, but it wasn't our best friend, under the circumstances.

"To-morrow afternoon we shall be lying further out in the bay," he remarked, "so that we won't have to row so far as we are doing to-night."

She was a fine vessel, and Jessie furtively kissed her sides as we climbed up to her decks, an action which the gallant captain saw and appreciated.

"I have arranged the cargo so that your father may lie down comfortable once he is inside, therefore you need have no fears for his safety once he is under the hatches."

Yes, once he is under the hatches, and can get there without being observed; but would he do this with that bright moon and the unseen watchers who might be about? In spite of the seeming ease of the transaction I felt morbid and heavy-hearted.

After showing us over the vessel and through his cabin, he once more rowed us back to Williamstown, where I turned my head aside as he bade Jessie good-morning.

"You will come about ten o'clock to-night, and spend as long as you can with me, dear?" said Jessie.

"Could I not come a bit earlier?"

"No, I must say good-bye to poor father first; you will have me to yourself all after that, until we part. God bless you."

I heard them kiss with curious sensations, thinking upon Walker. To-morrow night he would have to look on calmly while the same thing went on under his eyes. Would he be able to stand it, even for the sake of liberty? I wondered if I could had I been in his shoes.

When we reached home the cocks had begun to crow, so neither of us thought about going to bed; but we did not speak, for we were both consumed by the same terrible anxiety. I sat smoking pipe after pipe at the table, while Jessie crouched over by the open window and looked out at the sky.

At length daylight came to us, then I got up and had a bath, and mooned about until breakfast was ready and I could go to the office.

What a day that was for slowness. There was very little doing at the office, for the publisher was in possession, and both the proprietor and editor were out most of the time. I sat at my desk and tried vainly to read; my eyes were burning, and my heart sick.

Six o'clock and once more I was beside Jessie. I don't know how she had managed to get through the day, but she had my dinner ready as usual, and was busy getting a chicken ready for supper.

"Oh, Luck, what a day I have had all by myself, and thinking upon him, where he is at this moment, and if he has eluded his gang. Will the shadows never come?"

Slowly the sun set, and as twilight came on we both went into the verandah to watch for the coming of the man we expected so eagerly. We could do nothing, only wait.

One or two passengers went past, but they never stopped at the gate.

All at once I saw a figure about the size and build of Rainbow leaning on a walking-stick, as if lame, and coming along very slowly.

"That's him, Luck; oh, go out and meet him, for I cannot."

I went out of the gate and along the road. If it was Walker, he was well disguised—a long thin silvery beard shone in the twilight, while the clothes were rough made, and hung loosely upon him.

"Good evening, Mr Luck Mort; you see I have kept my appointment."

It was Walker. Controlling my feelings as well as I could, I shook hands with him, and led him inside to where Jessie waited for him all in the dark, for she had not yet lighted the lamp. I closed the door upon them, and went out to the gate to finish my smoke.

It was a sultry night, with a sky above which had gathered a crowd of dense grey clouds over the clear spaces since the sun had gone down. A good sky, if the clouds would only close up altogether, for they looked solid enough to shut out the light of the moon. As yet it could not be seen, although I knew it was beyond that heavy top bank, which meant a shower before night was over.

Would the rain hang off until early morning? There was no weather prophet wise enough to predict with certainty whether rain would or would not fall in Australia; these clouds looked like a heavy shower, but so had hordes of clouds before them, which had rushed away to mid ocean without discharging their gracious message to the thirsty soil.

When a man stands smoking good tobacco with the sole object of filling out time, a sky such as this was is quite enough subject to occupy his stagnant thoughts.

What a panorama, to be sure, those motionless cloudlets made, away on the horizon, with that clear background cutting them into fantastic shapes. I watched them with intense

interest, for I had no wish to look behind me, or hear a single sound from that room, still dark, and to me silent as the grave.

There were two small clouds close together, with a drift falling from them like a fringe of crape, and underneath, bobbing up heads of men, who seemed to be creeping upon them from behind a bank; morbid clouds of deep grey these were, which made me shudder, and wish that Jessie would light the lamp.

I was still sending up slow clouds of smoke towards these ominous clouds, when I felt a light touch on my arm, and looking down with a start, made out a small figure, the figure of Dicky.

"Hush! is he inside?" the boy breathed up at me.

"Yes."

"Been long there?"

"Quarter of an hour, I should say."

"Go in quietly, and tell him that I am here—tell him that he has been followed, and that I am going to find out who it is. I'll be back soon."

With another warning touch on my arm Dicky dissolved within the darkness.

CHAPTER XXIX.

RAINBOW LEAVES THE COTTAGE.

WHILE I was still deliberating in my mind whether I should disturb that reunited pair or not, I saw the flare of a match inside, and the next moment the lamp was shining half-high through the blinds. This, I knew, was the signal that I might enter, so I went in, locked the outer door behind me, and appeared before them.

Jessie had been crying in the dark—anyone could see that—and Walker, for the better convenience of kissing and comforting her, had laid aside his wig and beard with his hat.

"Is the back door locked and all the windows barred, Jessie?" I asked anxiously.

"No, Luck. Why?"

"Because I have just seen Dicky, and he thinks Walker has been followed. He has gone to find out. So put on

your beard again at once while I fasten up the house." This I said to Walker.

I left them with a single look round, and going to the back, saw carefully to the shutting up of the place. It wasn't very secure against policemen, but still it was better than an open door.

When I returned to the parlour, James Walker had once more resolved himself into Father Mort, with the venerable beard and the short-cropped silver hair which looked so natural.

He was sitting quietly at the table, while Jessie stood before him, literally devouring him with her eyes, and forgetful altogether of his corporeal wants.

"Oh, Jim—oh, Luck, I haven't had him a minute, and it's twenty minutes to ten already. In another twenty minutes the captain will be here, and then I can only play the dutiful daughter and the tender sweetheart, and that is dreadful just now, when I want my own chap all to myself."

Jessie was so hysterical with the reunion that my warning had not been listened to by her; not so, however, her wary lover.

"Bring along the supper dishes, Luck, there's a dear; you know where to find them. Don't forget the mustard. I don't remember whether I made up fresh stuff or not to-day. If I haven't, make it up; only leave us alone for a bit."

I was going out of the room to obey her, when James Walker said,—

"Stop, Luck; where did you see Dicky?"

"At the gate a moment ago."

"What did he say?"

"He told me that he thought you were followed, and that he would soon find out."

"So he will, so he will; no danger of Dicky making a mistake. Go out and do the kitchen-maid for one night, Luck, my friend. I am ready, whether Dicky brings back good or bad news."

"Oh, Jim, do you think there can be any danger?" cried Jessie, now thoroughly alarmed.

"No, lass; let us sit down and talk, while Luck gets the supper. I got clear of my gang yesterday, and I'm not going back to them again. You take your oath on that. I am going to sail to-night, or—"

"There's a tap at the window, Luck ; go out and see who is there. Go out the back way, and creep round to the front."

As she spoke Jessie sprang over to her lover, who was pulling out of his pockets a pair of revolvers.

"Yes, go round by the back, Luck. I fancy it must be Dicky."

I went through the lobby, and opened the back door gently, making my way round the side of the house as softly as I could. The dense, hanging cloud overhead was now a mottled mass, through which the moonlight was striving to break. Long shafts of silver light were pouring down through the ragged crevices, but as yet no direct shine.

I had just reached the verandah edge when Dicky vaulted over beside me, and drew me back again, round the house and into the back door, without speaking.

"Lock the door," and he darted towards the parlour.

When I got in again Dicky was standing quietly by the side of his master, telling his story.

"Sandy Macintosh knew you by your walk, and followed you here. I wasn't in time to stop him before he reached his employer, Detective Smith, or I might have stuck him in the dark. The pair were out there when you arrived, but it was Sandy who saw you, not Smith. I followed them until they reached the Williamstown police office, and then ran back all the way."

"Sandy Macintosh," snarled Jessie. "I know his real master, Hardwake, sent him down here. Smith may have been watching for himself all the time, but Hardwake is the man who has sold us, Jim. Now I'll hang him."

"Time enough for that," replied Walker coolly. "Are there any of the mounted constabulary about, Dicky?"

"The office yard was full of horses," replied Dicky gently.

"I have got time enough yet," replied Walker, getting up to his feet and seizing his revolvers.

"Wait a second," whispered Dicky, running out to the lobby and back again.

"They have surrounded the house," he said gently.

At the same moment a knock came to the front door, not imperative, merely such a knock as a visitor might give.

"That is the captain!" cried Jessie.

"No, it is Detective Smith," replied Dicky. "I know his foot."

Gyp was not a loudly demonstrative dog, it was seldom that he indulged in a bark, but as Dicky spoke he gave also a low warning snarl, his nearest approach to speaking.

"I'll go into the bedroom, Jessie, and reconnoitre with Dicky. You let Mr Smith come in, and keep him in conversation for a few moments, while we get out. I'll make to-night for Dicky's uncle in Little Collins Street. Come to me there when you can, and bring my passage money with you from the captain, if you can get it back, for we shall have to pay for our lodgings at Ah Kum's. Good-bye Jessie, and keep up your heart."

There was no time for tears or giving way to despair at present. Our plans had failed, and now we had all to do a bit of stern acting, if we would get back again to our old position.

Ten minutes to ten, the captain would be here presently, and there was the detective at the door, with his cordon hemming us in. Jessie, for the first time since I had known her, caught up the decanter of brandy and took a hasty quaff from it, then wiping her lips with her handkerchief, she darted to the outer door, just as the second smart knock sounded on the panels.

James Walker and Dicky had gone into my bedroom quietly, while I threw myself full length on the sofa and caught up a novel.

"Good evening, Mrs Mort; hope I don't disturb the young married couple by making my call in this unexpected fashion, but I happened to be down this way, with an hour to spare, so I thought I'd look in."

"Come in, Mr Smith," replied Jessie in a gay tone. How she could do it, with her lover in the bedroom, I could not imagine. "You couldn't have come at a better time, for we are just expecting a friend to supper; he'll be here in another minute. In fact, I thought you were him."

Mr Smith entered the room, with a sharp glance round and a scrutinising look at Jessie, who bore it without flinching.

"Hallo, Luck, taking it easy, I see."

"We are just waiting on the captain," replied Jessie.

"What captain—Rainbow, eh?" asked the detective, with a short laugh.

"No, not Captain Rainbow, or else I wouldn't have made you welcome here, Teck Smith," replied Jessie calmly. "We are waiting on my husband's friend, Captain Dawes."

"Oh, yes—of the ship *Susan*—I know him," answered the detective carelessly, as he laid his hat on the piano top and sat down.

"There he is!" cried Jessie, as another knock came to the door. "Now we can have supper."

She went to the door and opened it, leaving us together. A pause and a whisper followed in the dark, and then she once more entered with the captain, and from whose open face I could see he had been warned, and, with the promptitude of a man accustomed to emergencies and sudden squalls at sea, was prepared for the change of yards.

"You know Mr Smith, he says, Captain Dawes," observed Jessie, as she led forward the skipper.

"I can't say that I do," replied the honest tar gruffly.

"I did not say that he knew me, I only said that I knew him," corrected Mr Smith.

"And that makes all the difference, doesn't it?" asked the skipper sarcastically, as he took his seat and rudely turned his back upon the police agent.

"Yes," replied the detective genially, ignoring the snub, "all the difference in the world, who you know and whom you think you know."

"Excuse me, as I have no servant, while I prepare supper. I won't be long, gentleman," said Jessie, at this point getting up hurriedly.

"Can't we assist?" politely asked Mr Smith.

"Oh, no; sit where you are. I can manage nicely by myself, or along with Luck."

"But I'd like to assist you. May I insist on helping you, Mrs Mort?"

"Mrs Mort?" cried out the captain quickly.

"Yes, captain. Didn't you know that this young lady was the wife of that young gentleman there?" queried Mr Smith, with the sardonic innocence of a fiend.

"Is this true, Jessie?" asked the captain sternly.

"No; it is a lie. Ask my *brother* Luck there," said Jessie, throwing up her head defiantly. "I am not a married woman, you may be sure of that, Captain Dawes."

"Her *brother*! Ha! ha!" sneered Mr Smith.

"Yes, Jessie is my sister. This man is trying to make you take sides against us, Captain Dawes," I cried boldly, as I started up and advanced upon the detective.

"Hands off, Luck Mort," said the detective. "I don't want to hurt you, for I am after higher game; but, by God, if you take one step further in this direction I'll blow your simple brains out!"

"Will you?" cried the captain, suddenly flinging himself upon the detective. "Not while I am here to prevent it."

Mr Smith made a short struggle to get at his whistle, while this sea Hercules held him down on the carpet with his full weight, then he desisted with a good grace, gasping,—

"It don't matter much whether I give the alarm or not, as our bird cannot get out of this house. It is too closely watched."

"Look here, Smith, why didn't you be pleasant and wait for supper?" asked Jessie. "It was such a nice one."

"I'll take it now, if you please," retorted the captive, with a grin. "There's my whistle and my barkers to you. I don't want to hurry matters."

He handed his revolver and whistle to Jessie, who took them with a pleasant smile, yet with quivering lips.

"Now, that's nice, old chap. Let him sit up, captain; he's on his parole, and I'm going to reward him for his amiability. Say, which would you rather catch first, if you had your choice, Teck Smith;—Captain Rainbow or the murderer of Emerald Swamps?"

"The murderer, of course, for the other is as good as copped already. Can you put me up to this other gaff, if I promise to sit quiet and eat my supper without interfering with anything else?"

"Yes," replied Jessie.

"And will you do so whether the other is caught or not?"

"Yes, if you stay in this room, without making any signs to those outside, until I let you speak and go."

"Done," said the detective eagerly, shaking her by the hand. "That's a bargain. Do what you like to get him outside, as far as I am concerned. It will be no good, of course, for there are thirty men round this house; but you may try. I'll be passive."

"Now I can bring in the supper. Come, Luck, and give me a hand."

"Better not, Luck Mort. The police have nothing against you so far, but if you move outside this room they will have, with me as a witness. Go or stay as you like, of course. I

won't interfere with you, and now you are warned I'm going to make myself comfortable," saying which Detective Smith flung himself down on the sofa and took up the book I had left.

"May I also come with you, Jessie?" asked Captain Dawes, as we were going.

"No; wait and keep Mr Smith company. I'll be back presently," answered Jessie, giving him a look which said plainly, "Watch Mr Smith."

"All right, I will."

"Wait here just a moment, Luck. I want to say good-bye to him," whispered Jessie at my bedroom door.

Then, as I stood, she went inside and shut it behind her.

Three minutes passed of dead silence, and then the door opened quickly and Jessie whispered,—

"You can come in now, Luck. He has gone, so you can swear truthfully that you had no hand in it."

I followed Jessie to the window, which was wide open, and looked out to the night. It was beginning to rain heavily, with a great pattering on the dusty leaves and shingles, while outside the darkness was intense. Those clouds had not belied themselves after all.

Were the watchers near or far? I could see nothing in front of me, although I strained my eyes, as Jessie was doing, but not a sound met my ears beyond the pattering of the raindrops, while before my eyes seemed a curtain of blackness.

Have they got past that living cordon, for of course Dicky had gone with him? Suddenly, as I was watching, I heard two heavy falls, followed by a volley of rifles, and then the trampling of horses, accompanied by loud shouts.

Human nature couldn't stand it any longer. With a bound I was over the window and into the thick of the *mêlée*, striking right and left at the figures on foot, who were clutching at the reins of the horse on which Walker and Dicky had leapt, while close at hand I could hear the other mounted policemen galloping round.

It was all over in a second of time. I have been told that a battle seldom lasts much longer when once they come to close quarters. The last man was trampled under foot, while I was alongside of Walker, on another horse, riding for our lives towards Melbourne, with a dozen horsemen after us.

I cannot remember what I did during that short engagement, or how I got that horse. I expect I must have thrown

one of the troopers from it and taken his place. Fortunately for us they were good horses which we had stolen, and we did not spare them.

So we raced along for about a mile, when suddenly my companion drew up to the side of the road and halted. What was he about to do? I wondered as I also drew rein.

"Ride on, Luck, I'll come up to you presently," he shouted, and I rode on a little more leisurely, looking behind me.

All at once I saw the blaze and heard the report of six shots in rapid succession, and a wild outcry behind, then the bushranger came on madly and got up to me.

"That will keep them occupied for a bit," he shouted as he reached me. "Prick him up, Luck, we have no time to lose."

"What have you done, Walker?" I gasped.

"Crippled the front rank of horses, and tripped up the others, that's all, I think."

"For another five minutes we tore along the road, then he called out halt, and brought his horse to the stand. We were now getting near to the lamp-posts.

"Jump off, Luck; we'll do the rest on foot."

I followed his example, and letting go my horse as he had done, they both wheeled about and ran back the road we had come.

"Now, Dicky lad, show us that short cut of yours to Little Bourke Street?"

Following Dicky, we left the highway and struck across the swamps, getting before long into the courts and alleys of the Chinese quarter, then without interruption we reached the private door of Ah Kum's tea shop.

Ah Kum did not speak when he saw us, but at a sign from Walker drew us inside, along a dark passage, up a dark and shaky wooden stair, and into a small lamp-lighted office, ranged round with tea chests.

"Wantcheee night lodgings?" asked Ah Kum laconically.

"Yes, and be quick; they'll be here in another five minutes," answered Walker.

"Five minutes too muchly long, sil."

He pulled a string which dangled from a small tea box on the shelf above, and then lifted up the lid of a large tea chest which stood on the floor beneath it, revealing a black cavity inside.

"Down thele with you."

"But if they search the place they'll discover this easy."

"Tink so? See."

He shut down the lid and lifted it, showing us, instead of the cavity, the chest more than half filled with tea, then shutting it once again, he once more pulled the string, and again lifting the lid, showed us the empty cavity.

"All safe; you pop in and slidy down to nice bed. I shut the lid, police bym-by come and find only tea."

"But if they pull the string also?"

"No good; I do mole than pully stling; you no see quick 'nough. Dis is Chinee puzzly; too smalt for Melboulny man."

Satisfied with this explanation, Walker stepped inside and shot out of sight, Dicky went next, and as I prepared to follow he said,—

"No maky much noise down thele; no talky talky too much; plenty light, only you must keep quiet."

With this warning I sprang in after my companions.

CHAPTER XXX.

AT AH KUM'S.

I HAVE seen something like the contrivance down which we slid, on that night of our escape, used at fires, a long piping of canvas held slantways, but I had never tried one before, nor have I since.

As I leapt out of sight I was received into this funnel and shot down with great velocity, how far I could not tell, for I reached the bottom before I had time to think about the matter, landed upon a piece of loose netting, and then rolled out of that again upon a soft mattress, or rather, I rolled over the bodies of Walker and Dicky, without however hurting either them or myself.

Then, as we rose, by a natural and simultaneous instinct, we looked up at the place we had come from, to find the hammock still there, but no signs of aperture or funnel.

As the Chinaman had said, we had light enough, but not too much, and what was of it very subdued and mellow.

It was a long narrow apartment, not much wider than a

lobby, and composed of tea boxes on three sides, while even the ceiling was only roughly boarded over, so that we could see through the planks more tea chests piled up—a cunningly contrived hiding-place in the merchant's tea warehouse.

From the end where we had entered, the subdued light came through windows made from parchment or glazed silk, and painted to represent the paper which covers the tea boxes, each lined inside with strong glass, so that if anyone on the other side touched them they would appear solid.

The floor was composed altogether of soft mattresses, the same as those used in the opium rooms. We were comfortable enough, although not too well off for air.

Still, however, a little came to us through the crevices left between the boxes, and the shrinking of the weather-boards on the side where the windows were.

Through these crevices the lamplight from the room beyond struck in to us in long threads. We could also hear quite plainly the subdued voices of a number of people, and as we knelt down and applied our eyes we saw at once that we were looking into the outer fan-tan room, and that the game was in full swing, which explained at once the meaning of Ah Kum's warning for us to keep quiet.

As I lay on the mattress nearest the wall and looked through the peephole, for I had found a place in the wood where a dry knot had fallen out handy, near the bottom, so that I had a good view of what was going on, I saw that we were above the heads of the people, therefore had a bird's-eye view of the tables on the other side, where the bankers were seated, as well as the faces of those furthest from us.

As we could not speak to each other with only this thin partition between us and the players of this silent game, we all lay down to watch them, for unless one cannot gamble oneself, watching the play of others is the next best pleasure. We could see how intent they were upon it, from their eager faces, turned towards the light, and contrasting with the placid faces of the operators.

I saw one or two men there whom I knew casually. The night was young as yet, and the game only commencing. Stakes were being taken in and tickets given out, and were not at all high. Presently the theatres would disgorge the high speculators, for whose coming most of these hawks were waiting. Yet, for all that, they were eager and intent, for it

was not possible for anyone to get within the circle of that lamp and remain passive except he was a native of the celestial realms.

We had been perhaps ten minutes at our post, when we saw a commotion take place amongst the players, a considerable number of whom edged towards the door and disappeared. Thus we knew that our pursuers had been signalled as approaching.

Quarter of an hour later about a dozen of policemen, some in plain clothes, some in uniform, entered and took possession of the den, then we held our breaths, and waited on the next move of the wheel.

It was a strange sensation to be looking at these men who were hunting for us, and feel them so close to us that we could have touched them but for that thin partition. I was now in the same boat as my friend Walker. For having resisted the lawful authorities and actively assisted a criminal to escape, I suppose I should be considered little short of a bushranger myself.

And yet I felt no prickings of conscience for what I had done that night. Nay, it was with a glow of sincere pleasure that I observed Sandy Macintosh amongst the search party, and very much damaged about the face. It raised my drooping spirits to see his eyes so much swollen, and I trusted that it had been my fists rather than those of Walker's which done this tardy justice to him.

The proprietor, Ah Kum, duly appeared, and blandly smiling upon his visitors, led them from the room. We could hear their voices on the other side of the boxes, also above, as they went diligently over the house, and then they once more passed through the gambling saloon, satisfied that they had searched the place thoroughly, and, still hauling Sandy along with them, went further up the lane, I suppose, to other houses of the same kind.

After this, for over an hour, we had little to do except lie on our stomachs, with a look out occasionally at the shy birds who fluttered back again to their interrupted game now that the enemy had departed.

Then all at once the place began to fill up rapidly, and we knew that the theatres had closed—gentlemen, actresses, and members of the *demi monde* clustering in and mingling with the seedy-looking ruffians who had before been staking

their shillings. The game would now rattle on more actively, and the winners be quickly declared.

It was rather amusing to watch them trooping in, until the room was almost chock-a-block, while we perspired, as they were doing, with the atmosphere heated and vitiated with many breaths, for this was almost the only air we could get in our narrow hiding-place.

Amongst others I saw Stringy Bark enter, with his fair innamorata, Miss Rosalind, not quite by themselves, for the aunt was there, and also that doomed young actor, who did not seem greatly the worse of the annihilation he had received in the *Financial Diver* that day. He was as sprightly as ever, and as attentive to the nymph, ignoring his rival's dark glances, as if Stringy had been only the paid guide to this exploring party.

They tried the table, that is, Rosalind graciously permitted her little guide to purchase half-a-dozen tickets for her, while she laughed at him, with her companions, as he went forward to get them, thereby proving her claims beyond any dispute to those circles which the infatuated Stringy aspired to enter. I felt very proud of our caste as I looked on at this aristocratic byplay.

While I was still watching this party I noticed Mr Ovinus Hardwake enter by himself. He had not come to risk any money, for he stood in the shadow and quite close to my peephole, yet I could see his profile and portion of his lank shoulders as he watched the players from the distance.

Presently Macintosh returned by himself. The police had finished their search for the present, and granted him his liberty. Glancing round with his almost closed eyes, he soon saw his casual employer, and approached him; they had met by appointment.

What he was whispering to Mr Hardwake was not of a pleasant nature, for he ground out an oath now and then as he listened. And then he snarled,—

“Confounded fool, why did you let them know you were watching them?”

“They must have known, for he managed to get away. Someone must have seen me and warned them.”

“Damnation,” uttered Mr Hardwake in a deep voice.

I felt a touch at my arm and a mouth at my ear as Walker crept to my side and breathed, “I shall kill that

Macintosh first chance I get." Then he slid back again to his crevice, leaving me once more at my knothole.

When I looked again, Sandy Macintosh had left Mr Hardwake's side, and was standing at the table getting some lottery tickets, while his place had been taken by Detective Smith, who was shaking hands with Mr Hardwake in an effusive way.

"Good evening, sir. Having a look round at the substrata of Melbourne life?"

"Yes," replied our proprietor.

"So am I. It's a good study, isn't it—that is, a sad example?"

"Very."

"Yet useful. I often drop in here to improve my knowledge of humanity. Heard the latest about your new sub-editor?"

"No. What is it?"

"Broken the law, not to mention a few government heads to-night. We found out that he had been aiding the bushranger Rainbow under the rose. Pretended to be married to his sweetheart."

"What, were they not man and wife?"

"It appears not. The woman confessed as much to me to-night. Did it to help Rainbow to escape, and, by Jove, they have got off too."

"You astonish me about my sub-editor. I thought he was a highly moral young fellow."

"So did I; in fact, I think so still, only he has got himself into a devil of a mess now. Five years at the least before him when he is caught. Yes, Mr Hardwake, you'll have to look out for a new sub. The post is vacant, and all for nothing, too."

"How is that?"

"Well, you see, they thought to blind me with this pretended marriage; told me they were spliced at Warnambool. I sent down there and found out that it was a lie. Then I watched Jessie, and saw her make up to a sea captain, who is to sail to-morrow, and so I spotted the whole game, and was prepared—only, by Jove, they might have slipped me after all if it hadn't been for that pretty fellow over there with the blinders coming on."

"What did he do?"

"He told me that Rainbow had gone to the cottage. Now that I never expected, for I thought him too cute. However, it didn't serve us much, for we'd have nabbed him going to the ship. As it was, for the present Luck Mort and he have got clear."

"Where do you think they have gone?"

"To the bush, of course. It isn't likely that they'd come near Melbourne. Although the sergeant thinks they might, I say no."

Mr Hardwake said he was sorry to hear it, and with a brief good-night went out. As he went I noticed that Mr Smith followed very closely behind him.

"Luck," whispered Walker to me once more as he crawled over to me, "that man has got a very faithful attendant for the rest of his days of liberty."

"Who do you mean?"

"Your late employer;—Smith, will never leave him until he is safe in Carlton Gaol."

"What for?"

"Murder. Do you remember the wig and beard you brought to me?"

"Yes."

"They are the property of Mr Ovinus Hardwake. Jessie has taken her revenge, and lost five thousand pounds."

"He the murderer of Maria?"

"Yes; we shall find out why afterwards."

I knew instinctively the reason already, from what Maria had told me; this was the dastard who had deserted her, and whom she meant to punish. I felt sick with horror that I had ever taken the wages of such a monster. After doing that, it was not much of a drop to become the companion of bushrangers.

I looked out again upon the fan-tan players. The prizes were now being declared, and Miss Rosalind was beaming upon her infatuated victim, Stringy Bark, for she had just won a hundred pounds.

"What a lucky man you are," she was saying as she crammed the money into her small handbag; "really, aunt, he must come home to supper with us after that."

Happy Stringy was exalted into the seventh heaven at this praise and invitation, and giving her his arm he led her out of the den, her aunt and the young actor following.

The den was shortly after this closed and locked up ; then, feeling safe, we could lie on our mattresses and talk. Dicky was lying on his back, on the other side of Walker, either asleep, or pretending to be, for he did not join in.

"Well, my friend," said the bushranger, "you have done it now. Why didn't you leave me to fight it out for myself?"

"I don't know, unless that, being an Englishman, I like to be in a fight ; but that don't matter now, seeing that my occupation is gone as sub-editor," I replied.

"Yes, that paper has seen its last issue ; and now, what is our next move?"

"That is for you to decide, Walker. Are you going back to your gang?"

"No, I have burnt my ships. I posted a letter to-night at Melbourne with my resignation. After this, wherever I go, I have both the outlaws and police on my track."

"And you have me for a companion. What do you say to gold-digging for a change? I haven't tried that yet."

"If we can get the length of the gold-fields we might lose ourselves there, but it isn't easy to get there."

"Let us try, old man. I want to find a nugget badly."

"So do I ; for we sha'n't have much cash left after Jessie has paid our way out of this hole."

"Are they going to starve us here, for I feel desperately hungry after my short ride?"

"Oh, no ; Ah Kum will visit us as soon as he can do so with safety."

After this we both lay on our backs, waiting patiently in the semi-darkness, our thoughts busy with projects.

I was now a bushranger, or next door to it, being the companion and accomplice of a bushranger, and an outlaw to boot. Well, this was not exactly keeping my flag clean, as Mr Sampson understood it and advised me, but what else could I have done under the circumstances? No ancestor of mine would have owned me had I backed out of it like a cur. Now, I suppose, I must go on as respectably as possible, but above all, for the credit of my family, try my hardest to avoid five years' transportation.

For my name, and for the sake of little Sabina.

At this portion of my cogitations I was interrupted by the sudden downward flapping of one of the tea chest bottoms and the appearance of the canvas funnel. Next moment I re-

ceived upon my chest the astonished body of my terrier Gyp, who greeted me first with a yelp of horror, and then recovering from the confusion of his descent, began to jump upon me and lick me all over.

Having a sudden presentiment that I might be in the way if anything else came down, I hastily rolled over to one side, just in time to escape the rebound of Ah Kum, as he popped out, touched the netting, and made his obeisance something after the style of the clown at a pantomime.

"Hoply you all comfly, fliends?"

"Quite," we responded; "only starving."

"Thought so. Hele am something to keep you chewing."

He produced from his blouse a chicken, roasted whole, some bread and a bottle of wine, a plate, knife and fork, salt and pepper, in separate pieces of paper. How he had stuffed them all in I could not guess.

"Dat dam dog belong you? I thought so; he neally sell you dis night—he velly neally become stewed dog also, you bet."

"How so?" I asked.

"Tick Smith he bling dat dog; dat dog smelly you out, no go way. Tick Smith he smell somefing up. O Lod, no end of bothel wif dat dog! Two twos he go in my pot, only I catchy him up when no one neal and shut him up in box. You bet dat dog sell you yet."

I looked at the guilty Gyp, who now lay on his back, with a protesting paw up and a decidedly weepy expression about his eyes. He felt his own danger and want of caution, and was remonstrating as pathetically as a dog could do.

"Never mind the dog, Ah Kum, tell us about the police," said Walker, sitting up. "Have they gone?"

"Yes, fol to-night; to-morrow they come again. No good you going away fol the next week. How much you pay me fol de week, boald and lodgings?"

"How much do you want, Ah Kum?" asked Walker.

"Policily give me five hun-tun to bling them down hele, that don't count," observed the Chinaman gently.

"No, you shall have your five hundred, without counting, on the day we leave."

"Den all de trouble, dat will be one hun-tun each nightly fol de thlee."

"Are you going to charge for Dicky?"

"Ah, you know Dicky no full Chilaman. Dicky only half Chilaman. He smalt boy, Dicky; wolth five of dat new chum dele. Me only chalge half-plice fol New Chum; that come to one hun-tun pel night."

"All right, Ah Kum; we shall be able to meet your charge," replied Walker. "All dark, you know; no one must know we are here, or where we go, except Jessie, who will bring the money."

"All dalk; none ob de *boys* to know?"

"No."

"Dat will be one hun-tun mole."

"Very well."

"Glub extla?"

"As you like. How much is this chicken?"

"Ah, dat chicken—game chicken—he cost me thilty shilling. Me give you him fol same money."

"And the bread?"

"No chalge you fol de blead," answered the Chinaman magnanimously, with a sudden burst of generosity.

"And the wine?"

"What you like."

"All right, Ah Kum; you know what you will get if you are faithful to me. If you are false, you'll get this instead."

He pulled out his revolver and pointed it at the Chinaman significantly, upon which our host spread out his hands and dropped upon his knees.

"Do me look like falsy Chilaman? Me, de uncly of dat boy Dicky? Oh, Capin Lainboy, how could you?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

SABINA ONCE MORE.

WE stayed four days at Ah Kum's expensive establishment before a chance came to let us away, and totted up our bill to considerably over a thousand pounds. I think that celestial half-uncle of Dicky's was about the most mercenary and shameless of landlords. He would have made even a fashionable seaside lodging-house keeper blush to hear how he piled up the daily expenses, with such an air of injured innocence

when we attempted to dispute the point which was too pathetic for us to resist. And as he held us so completely in his power we did not scrutinise the bill of charges over closely.

Dicky stole out on the second night of our captivity and managed to see Jessie, who gave him some of the money which Captain Dawes had been keeping for her. She was well, but too closely watched by the police to come to us, and advised us to lie close for a day or so.

Ah Kum, if exorbitant in his charges, was a man of his word, for no sooner did he handle his fee than he set his wily wits to work to get us safely out of Melbourne, so that on the fourth night we crept out of that den, and once more could take a breath of fresh air. We had held a number of consultations together, and at last I had been brought to yield to his idea and route.

"We must strike for the mountains which divide Victoria from New South Wales, Luck. It will take us away from my old gang, and into new ground, where I am not so well known, up towards the Alps, where we may find safe hiding-places for months at a time, until the hunt grows cool, and then, perhaps, we may manage to get away from Sydney."

"Yes, that will be best, I think."

"I did not tell you that I am a connection by marriage of Mr Charles Condon's, did I?"

"No."

"Ah, yes, that is how I come to know him. His wife is a half-cousin of mine. He does not know, of course, what I have been doing for a living during the past few years. He thinks I am a horsedealer. I sent Dicky over with my own horse Prince, and half-a-dozen others, some time ago to keep for me, and I want to call in there as we pass for them. They are all splendid animals, so that you can choose a good mount amongst them. You don't object to see Sabina again, do you, and your old dog, Bernard?"

"Only one thing troubles me about this arrangement, Walker."

"Call me *Graham* when we are there, Luck, for that is my own name."

"Well, you may not be known to them as Rainbow, but if they get the papers they will know that Luck Mort has distinguished himself as the accomplice of that gentle bush-ranger."

"Yes, I have thought about that, and this is my main reason for going to see Condon. I must make a clean breast of it now to my half-cousin. It will be one trouble the more for him to bear, poor fellow, and he has enough already, but it can't be avoided; besides, I want Jessie to get a home, and he will give her one."

Ah Kum proved a master at disguises. He transformed the three of us so completely that no could have recognised us; even the dog Gyp was changed from a smooth-haired terrier into the ugliest and shaggiest black mongrel I ever looked upon. He was first shaved bare from nose to tail, and then a new coat glued on, much to his own disgust and discomfort. I am afraid that some stray mongrel went into the pot for the accommodation of Gyp.

Dicky was made into a juvenile Chinaman, with pigtail complete. For ourselves, we were turned into rough diggers, with swags on our backs, and pickaxes and spades at our shoulders. So we set towards the Wormangatta district, where the station of Mr Condon was situated.

Dicky had taken a letter to Jessie, telling her our intentions. How that silent boy managed to elude the police is more than I can tell. He never told us, or bounced, as other boys of his age might well do. He only delivered his message and brought back the answer as if it had been the easiest feat in the world. I also wrote to Jim Wood to assure him of my safety, and told him to keep his mind easy. Poor Jim, I knew he would be in a terrible state about me when he saw the papers.

We kept clear of the towns on our way up until we came to Wood's Point. When amongst the miners we knew that we would not be at all likely to attract too much attention. Here we took lodgings at a small hotel, and gave out that we were after work.

We were now amongst the mountains, and I began to realise for the first time the ruggedness as well as the picturesque scenery of Victoria. All about us were rich reefs, burrowed with mines in full working, with plenty of chances for us to get ourselves lost if we liked.

"What do you say, Luck, to hiring ourselves out for a spell? It will give us experience in the business."

"Yes, I should like that very well," I replied. So we settled upon doing this for a time.

We spent the first night of our arrival in the free library of the town, looking over the past week's file of newspapers, where we read full details of our adventures and descriptions of our persons. It was with great satisfaction that we saw Dicky had not been seen or taken notice of. It was only Captain Rainbow, *alias* James Walker, and Luck Mort they were after, and we were supposed to have taken to the Bendigo district.

I was sorry when I read about the horses which had been injured during that night chase. Two of them had been killed since, but none of the men had been seriously injured, which was a consolation to us.

In the later copies the interest in our case seemed to have abated, or rather been eclipsed by the most recent sensation, which was the arrest for murder of Mr Ovinus Hardwake. Detective Smith was greatly extolled for his cleverness in working up the evidence and arresting the murderer just as he was making his escape in the mail packet. The wig and beard had been traced to the theatrical costumier from whom it had been bought, and the identity of the purchaser established beyond dispute, so the blood of poor Maria would be avenged, and the career of Mr Ovinus Hardwake brought to a sudden close.

On the advertisement page of this same paper I read a brilliantly worded application of an experienced editor who wished for a country engagement, highest references offered, answers to be sent to S. B., care of Latour, Coffee Palace. It was easy reading who S. B. was. Stringy had been compelled once more to return to his old quarters in Little Collins Street.

Walker, or as I must call him for the future by his right name, Graham, managed the business of getting employment for us in one mine, at so much per day. So, on the second morning of our arrival, we both started work, with our Davy lamps, at about a couple of hundred feet below the surface of the earth.

It wasn't exactly the sort of work that my heart went out to—drilling, blasting, and sending up blocks of quartz—but it felt safe, and I was learning to know the difference between mica and gold, and also enjoying the companionship of as fine a set of fellows as I could have wished, with of course a few exceptions. Most of them working for wages,

for they had all the option of going on results, they did this to recoup themselves for losses at private digging, and save up enough to have another venture at sinking holes for themselves. Men thus disposed generally worked for a month or two for the mine owners and then went off to some of the neighbouring gullies, with a miner's right in their pockets, and began working again on their own account. That is, the single young fellows led this life of change, while the married ones had to stay on, and, I daresay, do much better with their two pounds ten to three pounds per week safe earnings.

It was a pleasant enough life we led, in this picturesque town amongst the mountains, with these fine, free, independent fellows for mates. There was no such thing as sneaking or seeking to prejudice their fellow-workmen in the eyes of the overseers, in order to curry favour for themselves, as I had seen in the city. We had our eight hours of sweating and doing our level best down below, and the rest of the sixteen hours to enjoy ourselves, and no one to bully us or interfere. I think, of all the changes I have hitherto had, the few weeks that I laboured at that gold mine are the ones I look back upon with the greatest pleasure.

It wasn't, of course, exactly all on account of my brother miners, although they were chums any man might look back to with regret. I may as well confess it. Mr Condon's station was only about fifteen miles distant, and that was where we spent our time, from Saturday night to midnight on Sunday.

Our mine lay a little way from the township, therefore as we had Dicky, who was as useful about a house as a woman, we left our hotel in the town and took up our abode in a little hut half-way to the mine, and which we hired at a nominal rent. There was a slab of wood, and a few stools which the last tenant had made at his leisure hours, and left behind him, and these, with our blankets and a few tin pans, set us up in the way of housekeeping.

During the first week Dicky, who had been often at the station before, found his way over there with a note from his master to his half-cousin, who kept him until Saturday, and then sent him back with three horses and an invitation for us to come over and spend the Sunday. The note of invitation was on black-edged paper, and also informed us that Mrs Condon had died two weeks before. So the afflicted

father and daughter of this victim to hereditary drink were at length relieved of their burden.

It is not a pleasant thought to think that the dead are better gone, yet, knowing what I did about Mrs Condon, I could not regard this news with unmitigated sorrow. I felt relieved for the sake of Sabina; she need no longer go to Melbourne, at least into those portions of that city which she had been forced to frequent when looking after her mother.

Four months had passed since last I saw the young lady, who, I must say, had occupied a good deal of my thoughts since, and now I looked forward with a little trepidation to this meeting. Of course she was only a young girl as far as would be considered in England, but somehow colonial girls are not the same as English girls of the same age are and, as I remembered her, Sabina was different to any other girl I had ever met.

I was going to visit her as poor as I had been when with her last, with the extra disadvantage of being under a cloud. Graham had revealed himself in his letter, so that her father was fully aware of the character of his invited guests; still, it was not very comfortable visiting any man under my present character.

Before we set out we speculated some of our money in smarter clothes, and took the precaution, before we sighted the station, to remove our wigs and beards and ride forward in our proper persons. Rainbow was now clean shaven, so that he looked more youthful, and, I think, handsomer than with his beard. There was a look about his oval face, regular features, square jaws, and clear grey eyes that reminded me of portraits of Bonaparte when he was first consul, before he began to put on fat, now that his beard was removed. Of course we both wore at our work false ones.

We crossed the range from Wood's Point, and after a stiff climb and steep descent rode through a dense forest tract of immense gum trees, until we came to the clearing which Mr Condon had made.

His station was an extensive one, partly taken up by farming, but with the main portion still left uncleared, or only partially so; his principal income was made from cattle rearing and fattening for the Melbourne market, so that we passed many herds of bullocks and cows on our way.

It was an orderly and comfortable looking homestead that

we rode up to at last, in the midst of extensive orchards and vineyards (he had taken lately to the cultivation of the vine, and was already laying the foundation of a remunerative business in colonial wine); besides, as my companion informed me, he was part owner of several of the gold mines about Wood's Point, thus the girl I went forward to see was in a fair way to be a rich heiress, which was not very consoling to a fellow with nothing.

Mr Condon was a tall, fine man of about forty. He had been an army doctor before taking up his present business, and still bore the upright tokens about him of his former profession; but the troubles he had passed through had softened the rigid lines considerably, so that he was only grave-looking and quiet in his manner.

Sabina, dressed in black, looked older and more womanly. She had been on the lookout for us, and met us at the lower fence, therefore I had the pleasure of walking up with her through the orchard, while Dicky and Graham rode on in front.

"You did not answer my last letter, Mr Mort. I suppose you did not get it," she said, after we had shaken hands.

"No, I could not call at the post office for letters before I left."

"I know all about that unfortunate affair. Father told me about it, and who you had risked your liberty for, and I am so glad to see you at last."

I walked alongside of her, a little shy and strange, for four months is a wide gulf to bridge over where young people are concerned.

"What a peculiar dog you have got, Mr Mort," observed Sabina, as the impulsive Gyp leapt up upon her with his false coat upon him. He had not forgotten her any more than I had. "I never saw such a breed before. What kind is he?"

"He belongs to the species Impostor, like his master. That was your old friend Gyp a week ago, but now I don't know exactly what to call him."

"Oh, what a shame to make such a hideous monster out of Gyp."

Sabina, girl like, was down on her knees cuddling the disguised bohemian, while I looked on with a spirit of envy growing up in me.

I don't think I ever longed for my uncle's money so much

as I did at the moment when I saw Sabina with that monstrosity of a quadruped in her arms. She was so sylph like, so natural in her easy loveliness, so utterly beyond me in her social position.

"Why, it comes off."

The black wool was getting cast, as the Chinese fixitive was losing its virtue and the hair behind beginning to grow. As she stroked the vagabond two or three tufts fell from him, and left him in a most mangy condition.

"Yes, it won't stand much washing," I replied gravely.

"Now, I tell you what it is, I am not going to allow you to endanger Gyp's precious life with any more experiments of this horrid kind. If you have to go about the country under false colours yourself you can do without this pet, so lend him to me, and I'll take care of him for you, until you can take him in his own honest coat."

"Will you really look after him for me, Sabina?"

"Of course. Haven't I got Bernard, and isn't he the dearest fellow in the whole world to me!"

We were standing together by this time, for she had risen from her knees, and Gyp had once more subsided into quietness. The twilight was coming on, for we had started after two o'clock, and on each side of the pathway hung the apple and apricot trees laden with their nearly ripe fruit, for it was now the end of April, the autumn of Australia. The sky was mellow with the afterglow, and the evening air cool and perfumed.

How she had grown during that four months. What a host of new beauties and womanly graces she had gathered about her in that short interval. As she raised her large blue eyes to me I saw a rosy flush steal over her pale face.

"Come and let me introduce you to my papa; he will be wondering why we are lingering."

Ah! I had for the moment forgotten that I was Luck Mort the sundowner, and that she was the daughter of a rich man. But with the mention of her papa, I gathered my scattered senses, and leading my horse by the bridle, followed her into the stableyard.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A WEEK IN ARCADIA.

WE spend a happy Sunday at Fernwood, and about midnight left them and rode back to our hut at Wood's Point, so as to be ready for our next week's work.

Everything was arranged as we could have wished. Mr Condon really was in want of a housekeeper, and had already advertised in the Melbourne papers for one, therefore all that he had to do was to put aside the other applicants and write down to Jessie, as if she had already applied, and accept her. Thus all suspicions would be set aside, and she should be secure in a good home.

He asked me a good deal about my antecedents and family, on the Saturday night, after Sabina had retired, and we sat together over our cigars and wine, and quite warmed my heart towards him when he said he had heard about my father Captain Mortimer.

"One of the heroes of Lucknow. The world may forget these men, but we army men don't. Stay where you are at the mines, for the present, my boy. I have influence enough to set the colonial wheels working on your behalf, for of course you couldn't do anything else than help your friend when he was in trouble. As for you, Cousin Graham, you have put yourself beyond any man's assistance, and must paddle your own canoe. If I can help you out of the country, I will, but you mustn't implicate this young simpleton any further."

Sabina and I spent the Sunday pretty well by ourselves, going over the station, for her father occupied himself with his half-cousin. Dicky, satisfied that he could at length get off duty, spread himself out on the grass plot in front of the house, and enjoyed himself in that doglike and indolent fashion most of the day.

Bernard greeted me in a very sedate manner. He recognised me as a past master by reaching up his enormous paws on my shoulder and licking my face, after which he went over to the side of Sabina, and followed her, as much as to say, "You gave me away, and I am comfortable in my change of quarters. While you are together I shall honour you both equally, but my duty lies with Sabina."

I honoured him for his manly sentiments, and only wished that I could stay and share with him in his duty.

We parted with them and promised to return on the following Saturday, when Jessie might be expected to be with them. Dicky took back the horses and walked over to Wood's Point, coming in while we were at work, and in time to have supper ready for us. Irish stew was Dicky's speciality, made with mutton when beef was not available; but when he could get a piece of steak, then we could wish for nothing more succulent and delicious. We never varied that dish. In the mornings when we went off to work and he would ask, "What would you like for supper to-night?" our answer would be, "Irish stew, beef if possible."

Of a night, after supper, we used to stroll down, of course in our disguises, for we only took them off when we came within half a mile of Fernwood, to a small shanty where the miners generally congregated on an evening. I daresay it was one of the most disreputable spirit shops in the township, but it was handy to our hut, and most of the fellows in our mine used it.

Card playing went on pretty freely there—poker and such games, where the money is quickly realised and lost. The married men did not go much there, but the young, reckless blades patronised it regularly.

The landlord was a bully, parded fellow, who could hold his own in a row, and there was occasionally one or two took place during the week; but it was lively and hospitable, for the landlady was a free-and-easy, buxom, and larky woman, who made us all feel at home in the place.

One night I heard a quarrel take place between two Irishmen, and I was rather amused at the insults they pitched at each other.

At first there was wild swearing and loud oaths, then presently they passed beyond that limit of friendship, and, as I understood, were enemies for life, when one addressed the other as *Mr* Muligan, while he retorted with, "You're a gentleman." It seemed compliments, after the blasphemy, but I was wrong in this society. To call a man "Mister" was the direst insult, while to retort with "Gentleman" made the quarrel a feud for life. So we poor innocents live and learn.

I had a mate on my shift who was a German, and rather

of a morose character, yet he took to me, and after a fashion we became friends.

His name was Otto Schopenhauer, about thirty years of age, short and stout built, with a scar like a sabre wound down his right cheek, blue eyed, as Germans mostly are, and fair haired. He had been fairly well educated, and was particularly versed in mineralogy. As we got better acquainted he told me that he wanted a couple of mates to join with him in a prospecting expedition. With his knowledge he could fix on a good place and make our fortunes.

Now this was tempting, to say the least of it, for I wanted badly to make a fortune just now, more than at any other period of my life, so I spoke about it to Graham, with the result that Otto Schopenhauer came and joined us at the hut. We had now resolved that as soon as we had made enough money we would go with him and try our fortunes on virgin soil as independent diggers.

Another week's work over, and another Saturday afternoon ride to Fernwood, where Jessie was waiting for us along with Sabina, at the outer orchard fence, and we four went on together on foot, while the discreet Dicky rode in front—wonderful boy that for premature wisdom.

They were going to pull the apples that next week and press the grapes and were short-handed, could we get away to help them did we think?

Yes, we did think it was the easiest thing in the world to send Dicky back on Monday morning with our excuses, and enjoy, instead of hard labour down in the dark, a week of sunshine in paradise.

I half wondered, as I thought upon the simplicity of our escape from Melbourne, how it had been so impossible a matter for Rainbow to make his escape out of the country altogether, but he told me it had been always the same with his other attempts; so long as it had only been to the bush he could always circumvent the police, with the same ease as we had managed this time, it was the getting away altogether that baffled him.

"I feel like Vanderdecken in this, doomed to get so far and no further—to make an attempt as I am doing now towards happiness and an honest life, and then to be drawn back again into the vortex. However, let's forget that, and for a week at least enjoy ourselves."

Jessie had brought with her some news from Melbourne. *The Financial Diver and Undercurrent Searcher* had died almost as violent a death as its originator was likely to do shortly, and a universal lightness seemed to pervade the commercial world in consequence. Stocks had risen, trade was beginning to grow brisk, for the exchange gamblers were once more speculating, and able to concentrate their thoughts upon business and pleasure.

Stringy Bark had started a new business; he was organising a scratch company to do the provinces, and at the moment dividing his time between the engaging of professionals and the suing of Miss Rosalind for breach of promise and the recovery of his presents. In this he was backed up by the jewellers, to whom he was so heavily in debt, and the case promised to be one of the coming sensations.

The aristocratic Miss Rosalind Longford had used him cruelly at the last, and as soon as she knew that his power to damage her in print was gone she had cast him over to the philistines, as closely shorn as ever merino mutton could be, or as Delilah served Samson, cutting him dead everywhere, yet refusing to return her loot, therefore the half-dried house-worm had rounded on the Secuba. I wished, when I heard this, that I could have been able to return and hear that coming trial, for reading about it would not be half the fun, and I felt morally certain that Stringy would conduct his own case, for no lawyer in the land was capable of doing it so well. The citizens of Melbourne had a treat before them when this Prince of Larikins cross-questioned the lady who had deceived him, and Stringy never disappointed his audience.

Rainbow threw aside all the melancholy and forebodings which had possessed him lately, and which had made him rather a sombre companion to us in the hut, for he had been almost as pessimistic as our new mate Schopenhauer. As soon as he saw Jessie he became like a boy for high spirits, and hailed the orchard and vineyard gathering with wild delight.

"Let us eat, drink, and be merry," he said, quoting the first part of the motto of Sardanapalus, and I had not the heart to finish the sentence for him.

Love is a most infectious epidemic. Now that Jessie was reunited to her lover, the looking on at their endearments made Sabina and I more free with each other, and

drew us unconsciously on in their thoughtless train. A pair of lovers is quite sufficient to make twenty couples, if there are so many young hearts about, and what I should never have had the courage to do had we been alone became almost a necessity with the proximity of that other couple.

From early morning until dusk we worked, laughed, and jested in the gardens and vineyards, filling the baskets with the ripe fruit, and holding arcadian feasts under the shadows of the trees and arches, our hands and lips dyed purple with the juices, while Mr Condon occupied himself mostly superintending the presses. It was a week to be remembered for ever afterwards, like the rest which thirsty travellers take in the oasis between desert and desert.

Would Jessie be followed up here by those Argus-eyed hunters. Jessie had hitherto been unconsciously their decoy duck. This fear intruded occasionally like a dark cloud on our sunny horizon, but we pretended not to see it, for as yet no rain had fallen.

A bushranger is a very formidable apparition when he starts up on a lonely road, with his crape mask on and his revolver pointed towards one; but as I knew Rainbow I never, somehow, could realise this grim phantom in connection with him. He was so confoundedly poetic in his sentimental moods, so exuberant in his gaiety and animal flow of spirits when he was skylarking, so mercurial and possessive altogether that he quite carried us off our feet. Perhaps Napoleon was after this style also when he was relaxing, which might be the reason why so many who came under his influence thought it nothing to die for him afterwards.

When night came our work was over for the day, and then after supper, while Mr Condon sat in the dining-room reading and smoking, we went out to the air, Jessie and her lover together, Sabina and I playing propriety.

Of course we always lost sight of the other pair very shortly after we had left the house, and found plenty to say for ourselves under the starlight. Mr Condon was the most trusting of fathers, and never inquired how we had spent the hours between supper and bedtime.

I don't think I can tell you all we spoke about; it would be tiresome, I have no doubt. I shall only give you a little of our last conversation the Sunday night before we parted, and leave you to jump at what had been said before.

"I had a long chat with father, this morning, Luck," observed Sabina, as we sat together in a little arbour at the end of the vineyard, "and he said that he did not care how hard up the man was who wanted to marry me, so long as he loved me enough, and was honest. He had money enough for both of us, and all that he wanted was to see me happy; and you love me enough, don't you, dear, to make me happy?"

I did not give my reply to this in words, yet the little maid seemed to be quite content.

"Will you speak to him to-night?"

"No, Sabina, I could not come to you a pauper. There is a fellow at our camp, a German called Schopenhauer, who is a geologist, and all sorts of isms, a rare clever fellow, and he tells us he knows a place where he is sure plenty of gold can be found. Graham and I have given our word to be mates with him, and so we are going with him, next week, perhaps, to have a dig on our own account. Let us wait until I see how that turns out. If it is good, I can come to your father and ask him fair and honest for you, without a blush."

"But if it doesn't turn out well, dear? Gold is so uncertain, you know."

"Then I'll write home and try to borrow some money from my cousin's lawyer, and ask your father for a share in his station; that would not be so sneaking like as to come as if I had courted you for your money."

"Very well, Luck," sighed Sabina. She had been too long used to curbing her own inclinations to be impatient now. "I shall wait until you are ready for me, for I am young enough yet; and you know you can depend upon me, don't you?"

Dear little darling, still a child in years, but so world wise and old in feeling. As I felt her slender form creep close to me, and her pure breath laving my neck, I wondered what I had done to deserve such good fortune.

"You have made me so happy, Luck, since you came. The world seems all different. Father is happier also, I think, for he is so clever that he knows all about it, whether you speak to him now or not, and I am sure likes you as if you were his son. Ah, it is so nice to be cared for by such a strong, handsome fellow as you are."

I should never have had the audacity to have made love to this little woman if she not taken it all so much for granted, and in her innocent affection said for me what I thought.

Besides, even now, I can hardly remember how it first came about that our lips sought each other and she found her way to my breast. Of course I can never forget the first shy kiss, but how I took it is more than I can tell. We approached it so gradually, and without any words leading up to it, or explanation afterwards, and ever since had thus began and ended our nightly walk inside this arbour.

Jessie and Rainbow used to drop us there, and go further on by themselves, and call for us in the coming back, merely remarking, "Time we were in now, Sabina." So we rose and followed them inside, where we always found Mr Condon at his studies, who invariably greeted us with the same remark, "Hope you have enjoyed yourselves, young people."

After this, a song or two, and when the girls had said "Good-night" and retired, a game of cards and a quiet chat before we followed their example.

On this last night, however, they all sat up to see us ride away, and Graham spoke about our gold seeking expedition.

"Yes, there is gold enough around the gullies of Wood's Point," replied Mr Condon. "And I don't mind standing my share of the preliminary expenses. Can you depend upon the knowledge of this Schopenhauer?"

"Yes; he has his certificates of proficiency in mineralogy, besides a long experience in the working part of mining," replied Graham.

"How is it, then, that he has not made his fortune before this?"

"He has been unfortunate, he tells us, in his associates. Been robbed and swindled out of several rich finds, and left in the lurch, therefore he doesn't care to take up with everyone."

"So he has taken up with the king of bushrangers, at last. Well, I think he must be a good reader of character, James, and there may be a chance that he will see the Fatherland yet as a rich man. Go ahead with your prospecting—you're as safe down there as anywhere for the present—and I'll stand the expenses for a week or two."

With this we got on our horses, and, giving them a cheery "Good-night," rode away. Before we turned the corner we halted to put on our disguises, and then Rainbow waved his hat towards the distant lights and sighed,—

"A happy week, Luck, hasn't it been?"

"Yes, Graham, very."

"You've got on all right, old chap, Jessie tells me. Know at last where to drop your anchor—eh?"

"Yes, I think so, Graham."

"I wish to God that I could see my port as clearly."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE GOLD GULLY.

OTTO SCHOPENHAUER was not a pleasant companion, either waking or sleeping. During his waking hours he was silent, and suspicious of everyone. All Germans are, of course, tainted with this failing, more or less, when with Englishmen. They are for ever thinking that we are trying to get the better of them, and for ever trying their hardest to get the better of us. He hated to be left alone, and would follow us about into the drinking shanty where we spent our leisure hours, not drinking much himself, but waiting until we could take him home again. We never were free of his company from the moment we consented to the joint partnership, and, as he hardly ever spoke, he was rather a dead load on our hands.

But he was undoubtedly clever, and had read a great deal, and also travelled over the most of the Australian gold-fields. We hadn't the slightest doubt but what he would guide us right in our search; but, like Mr Condon, we also wondered how he had not long before this made his pile. If his explanation was the correct one, then he had been extra unfortunate, and therefore had every reason to be suspicious of his neighbours.

He was a very troublesome sleeper, and the victim of frightful nightmares, and what was worse, talked loudly in his sleep—sometimes so loudly that we could not rest. His nightmare always took the same form. He was evidently threatened with a violent death, or struggling vainly against enemies for his life. He explained these visions by saying that he had two or three narrow escapes in his time, which had shattered his nerves completely. So that, while we pitied him, we were decidedly uncomfortable in his proximity, and might have dissolved partnership but for the thirst which was in us to find gold.

Dicky was particularly interested in the German. He would watch him thoughtfully when he was awake, and listen attentively to his ravings when asleep; but, as he never warned his master against this interloper, we concluded that he thought him safe so far.

Mr Condon rode over to our hut on the Monday afternoon, to see Schopenhauer draw up our deeds of partnership, and paid in his first instalment as his share instead of labour. Our arrangements were, while we were working he was to pay at the rate of one pound per day, and furnish us with what tools we required, while we gave our labour instead, all profits to be afterwards divided equally. Wanting capital, as we were, this arrangement satisfied even the suspicious and secretive German, so having got our business made out all square so that we might not be interfered with in our claim, on Tuesday, after breakfast, we started out into the ranges under the leadership of Otto.

He had dreamt a dream, he told us, some months before this, in which he had seen a place where much gold was, and that when he saw the real spot he would recognise it again from certain landmarks which he had noted in his dream.

Knowing how much addicted he was to visions of one sort or another we were not astonished that something special had impressed him, yet we were not at all disposed to treat this mode of gold seeking as folly either, for gold diggers, like gamblers, are very superstitious and great believers in omens, and we had mixed too much with these gentry lately, and heard too many strange stories about lucky nuggets having been prognosticated, not to be slightly tainted with the same complaint.

Still, it was a wearisome game to be trotting over ranges and through gullies after this sullen Teuton, and never seemingly to be coming nearer our goal.

"It is in dish quarter someferes," he said, when about sunset we threw ourselves down utterly fagged out, "for I know de structure and oudline of de ranges. In my dream it vas moonlight, and dat always alters scenery a lettle, bud I shall find it to-morrow perhaps."

Dicky gathered some dry wood and lit our camp-fire, then, after a billy of tea and the damper he had prepared the night before, we made ourselves as comfortable as we could.

It was a new moon which rose and set early behind the

closely wooded ranges, for we had taken up our quarters within a narrow gully a considerable distance from any of the other mines, and nearer to Fernwood than our former hut. A quiet night and a lonely spot.

"If dat moon was only bigger I should find it, I know. All de dream is plain except one part, dat we must find out. Perhaps I shall dream about it again."

As we lay listening to the sounds of the rock wallabys, wild cats, and other denizens of the forest, for the Australian bush is most lively by night, we could hear that Schopenhauer was having another of his ghastly nightmares, for he woke the echoes with his harsh yells and snortings as he wrestled with his imaginary foes. It was not safe to lie within five yards of that dreamer when he began to kick out and fling his arms about.

"Some of these nights his enemies will conquer him, and then he will never wake," remarked Rainbow, as he rose and aimed a clod at the tortured sleeper, which, half waking him, changed the current of his dream, for after this he only panted, as if running hard, and then ended by chuckling grimly.

In the morning Schopenhauer woke up and told us that he had dreamed again about the lucky gully.

"It was moonlight once more, a little moon, half big, and the gully has a narrow opening. I found the gold quite close to the surface, and then I forgot the exact spot; that is the part I always forget most when I wake."

"You point out the gully and I'll go bail that it won't be for want of sinking if we miss the ore," answered Rainbow, and then once more we began our search.

We took the ranges by degrees, plunging into every fissure we saw, and only giving it up when our guide shook his head and said,—

"No, this is not the one. I shall know it by the rocks when we come to it; we are near it, though, I know."

For the next few days we floundered about, backwards and forwards, without losing heart, although we wanted badly to get to work with our pickaxes and spades, while Otto watched the moon growing each night with anxious looks, always telling us we were near to the spot.

At last one afternoon we lay down to rest earlier than usual, for the German said that the moon would be big enough for his purpose that night.

Would we find gold enough, I wondered as I lay on my back and puffed at my pipe, or was this only a wild-goose chase which would end, as so many of my other plans had done, in disappointment?

Slowly daylight left us, and the half moon rose over the ranges, lighting the trackless valley with a ghostly and uncertain gleam.

"Forwards!" cried the German, as he sprang actively to his feet and ran on in front of us, while we followed as fast as we could.

"I have the first landmark, now the rest is easy. Come," he cried exultingly, after about half an hour of blind stumbling in the semi-dark.

He scrambled up the face of the hill, amongst some loose stones, until he got upon a boulder, and then stood motionless, looking towards the opposite side of the gully.

"Do you see dat white mass of quartz amongst the trees over there, with the black shadow behind?" he cried, pointing wildly with his finger.

We all looked in the direction, and saw the quartz gleaming, right enough, in the moonlight.

"That is de endrance to the golden gully."

We took our bearings carefully and then plunged on after him once more, with hope throbbing at our hearts, down the cliff face, over the shallow watercourse, and up amongst the close tangle of undergrowth.

We saw him, above us, clutch on to the white boulder and draw himself up into the moonlight, and then, rounding the rough edges, disappear from sight.

One after the other we followed his example, with our swags and miner's tools slung behind us, Dicky bringing up the rear, up to the moonlight, along the ledge, and after rounding the corner, into that narrow slit, which looked more like a crack in the rock than the entrance to a gully.

"Hold hard!" exclaimed the German, as we once more stood beside him in the dark. "If my dream is right, we should be standing upon a ledge of rock with a considerable dip on the other side. Better let us see first, in case we drop over and break our necks."

The night was calm enough outside, and where we stood a match could be lighted and held with the same ease as if inside a room. So we got out our matches, and continued

lighting them as we advanced, and crept cautiously forward, Otto still going in front.

"Yes, there it is," he said, quietly throwing his lighted vesta from him into the darkness below, "the gully of my dreams. Now we all can go to sleep, and wait until morning before prospecting any further."

I don't think any of us slept for the rest of the night on that ledge, but we lay down, and waited with what patience we could upon the sun rising.

I could not doubt any longer, if the dreams had been realised so far, that the rest of this dream might come out right also; it was too singular a coincidence to be a delusion surely.

Slowly the moon sank, and left us for a time with only the stars above us; then they began to fade, while the sky became greyer and lighter. First we could see each other's watchful faces, then the rocks on either side began to take form, and at last we had light enough to begin our exploration.

The ledge whereon we stood overhung a watercourse, which at some former epoch had been dammed up by a landslip, and lay beneath us at about fifty feet, so that if we had walked on we should have had a fair drop amongst the boulders below, and not much chance for our necks.

The gully into which we looked was not a very extensive one—indeed it was more like a split in the hill than anything else—between fifty to a hundred yards at its widest point, and narrowing to mere fissures at either extremity. From end to end, as far as we could see, it was no longer than half a mile.

Its sides were partly covered with undergrowth, boulders, and yellow soil, the boulders composed of light-coloured quartz, and along the bottom lay, in the wildest confusion, stones and debris of all sizes. As it had been a long dry season there was not much water in the creek; a few muddy looking water-holes glistened here and there in the gathering light.

"Well, mates, what do you say? Does that not look like a good place to dig for gold?" said the German, pointing below him.

Yes, it had all the bearings about it that one could wish, as far as our late experience went to prove.

"We must cover our claim of ours before we begin to work," observed Otto cautiously.

"How far off do you think we are from Wood's Point?" asked Rainbow, as we looked round us.

"Nod more than twelve miles ad mosd," replied the German.

"Then I'll tell you what we'll do to make this as good a hiding-place as ever Nature provided."

"What?"

"Grub round the roots of a couple of these trees up there and let them drop over the entrance; that will shut us in."

All above us, and on the summit of the hills, the gums grew in dense profusion, so that what Rainbow proposed was about the best thing we could do. With this covering no one would think that there was any gully at all behind, unless, of course, they had been like Otto warned by a dream or some other supernatural agency.

"That job completed, we must peg out a claim over there in the outside gully, in the most likely spot, as a blind to casual prospectors, and build a hut close to it, where we can live and look after our property; and when we have made a hole we can come up here quietly and do our work. Shall we go down now and have a look round?"

This was what we were all longing to do, so with one accord we began the descent—not a very difficult matter now that the light was strong enough to let us see our way about. At one portion of the ledge the boulders rounded off, so that by climbing down, holding on, and dropping from ledge to ledge we very soon reached the bottom, and could look about us and examine the soil.

Otto Schopenhauer dropped upon his knees and began straightway to grub amongst the loose stones and sand, and bringing up a handful, he examined it closely.

"Yes, dere is gold even on de surface—look how thick it is, mades—payable enough here—my dream was a good one. *Och, Mein Gutt!* what is that?"

He started back suddenly from the spot which he had disturbed as a large tiger snake darted out and disappeared with a flop into the waterhole beside which we had been standing.

"One of the guardians of the treasure," I replied, laughing. "See, there is another!"

"It seems as if we have disturbed a peaceful colony," said Rainbow, as he struck at the second snake and left it wriggling with a broken back. "If they are as plentiful as this about the gully we shall have to look out carefully before we begin scraping the earth."

Many naturalists insist that the fauna of Australia is

scarce, considering the size of the country. If this be so, then we had hit upon one of the few favourite sites for the congregating of the snake world. For during that first tour of ours through this gully we raised specimens enough to have supplied several museums, and left behind us quite a cemetery. Indeed, we had little leisure left for testing the gold-bearing quality of the ground in the excitement of the routing out and slaughtering of the natives whose land we had taken possession of.

Still we returned to the outer gully in very high spirits, and without hardly pausing for breakfast we set at once to work at the overturning of the two nearest trees on the hill-side which overlooked the entrance.

I daresay we needn't have taken all this trouble, for from the other gully the entrance could not be seen. We had passed it ourselves several times without noticing it, for the foliage screened it so completely from the lower level; but we knew that we were not likely to remain long undisturbed. A prospecting party in a gold district is very quickly fished out and followed up, no matter how dark they try to keep their projects.

We worked hard with our pickaxes at the roots of those young gums, so that night was upon us before we could say they were trembling; then we left off work and had supper.

During the night there was a bit of a breeze, and the trees came down with a crash in the direction we wished them to take, so that when we got up next morning we found that the entrance was completely hidden, while we, who knew the secret, could easily creep between the branches to our gully.

We now devoted ourselves to running up a rough bark hut, with a stone chimney. A couple of more days set us up with a fairly good house, at least as good as a black fellow's *wuurn*, which was quite good enough for us for all the time we expected to be in it.

"I think we had better have the horses over, Luck," observed Rainbow, as we sat on the first night inside our new house. "They will be handy if we want to get provisions from Wood's Point, or take any gold over to Fernwood."

"Where did you say the gold was to go?" inquired the German in a constrained, dry tone—the quiet tone Germans always use when they are most suspicious.

"Well, Otto, it isn't found yet," laughed Rainbow, "but when it is I should say straight over to Mr Condon, our partner's station, to keep safely for us."

"Bud can you quide trusd Mr Condon?"

"With my life, with all our lives if need be," retorted my friend firmly and quickly.

"Ah!" Otto Schopenhauer gave a heavy sigh, and looked at the burning log with a stolid, unreadable stare, then he resumed slowly, "Yes, I suppose we must have some safe blace to keep it in for de present; bud don't you think, now that we have found de gold gully and dere seems so much in it, dat we might do without Mr Condon as a pardner, and pay him back his liddle advance, it would be so mush the more for us, you know, with three pardners instead of four."

"No, Otto Schopenhauer, we won't start this partnership shabby, any more than we will count our eggs before they are laid," answered Rainbow sternly. "I've seen that sort of game tried on before in business, and it always ended badly. First one partner paid off leaves three, then say another partner shot by accident leaves only two, and next another accident takes place and leaves only Otto Schopenhauer as sole heir to the estate. No, my boy! If the devil is whispering probabilities like these to your soul, kick him behind you before we start, for I'm a devil at the revolver, and maybe the first accident will happen to you. Savy—eh?"

"Yes," answered Otto in his densest and stupidest manner, "we'll stick to de four original pardners—for the present."

"That's so!" murmured Rainbow significantly, with a glance towards Dicky, who softly nodded back again.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FORTUNE'S SMILES.

A LITTLE while after this Rainbow and I went outside, leaving Schopenhauer in his own corner taking his beauty sleep before beginning his nightly conflict. Dicky stayed behind with him.

"I think I have at last solved the reasons of our German partner's evil dreams and continued bad fortune, and I reckon

we'll have to watch him as closely as the snakes if we find much gold in that gully," said my companion. "He is a man who is in the habit of reckoning up his profits before he has done his work, and does not like to share them with anyone."

"You think, then, that he has committed some murder in the past?"

"I wish I could make as sure of escaping as I am sure about that; and what is more, he has not profited much by his crimes. He has all the meanness, rapacity, and craftiness of his nation, with a good deal of their imagination, which takes the place of conscience with him, and which flagellates him nightly. Yet for all that he would not hesitate to add a few more crimes to his list if he thought he could gain anything by doing so. That is where he has failed in life, he is too narrow to see an inch further than his nose, and too greedy to be able to give up a small advantage to gain a greater. I bet you he had not killed his last partners an hour before someone else robbed him out of his ill-gotten gains, because, through that very suspicion of his, he could not take ordinary precautions over the safe disposal of them. However, Dicky is on his trail, so we may rest easy ourselves. We won't be surprised by him."

"Are you not afraid that he may discover who you are and betray you to the police, Graham?"

"No; he lives in too great a dread of them himself to do this. He may attempt to swindle us, or even murder us for our share, but he won't betray us to the police, and until we do find gold enough he is too frightened of his own company to attempt to thin us off. I bet you he wouldn't live in that hut alone, not for all the gold in Wallahalla. In the dark he is perfectly safe; it is only in daylight that he has an ounce of courage left in him."

"When should you like the horses over, Graham?" I asked a little after this, as we were still promenading in front of the hut.

"As soon as possible. I always feel safer with some horse-flesh handy. Would you like to go for them?"

"Yes, if you don't mind, old chap."

"Well, go to-morrow morning, and I'll rush up a shed for them before night. Don't bring Prince; he must be kept fresh and well fed. Bring over three of the shabbiest looking amongst them, so that it won't look suspicious. In

fact you had best ask Condon for three of his own stockmen's hacks; they'll be good enough for the mountain work. Tell him that we have found the El Dorado, and that he must prepare his safe for deposits—and of course say all sorts of kind things to Jessie for me."

Having thus finished our confab we returned to the hut. Dicky met us at the door, with his finger to his lips, and pointed towards Schopenhauer, who was lying on his back and speaking in his sleep.

"Vour pardners, one, do, dree, vour—dree pardners, do pardners, one pardner, and all de gold is not divided."

"You hear," whispered Rainbow, "that division of the yet to be discovered gold is troubling the honest fellow already."

"Dere were five ov us at one dime, bud we were not all five pardners; no, dere was only anoder, and he had de gold. Ah! dere was only von pardner left dot dime, and dot vos me; bud de gold—help! help! you shall not take it vrom me. I had to vork hard for it—no, you shall only take a vair share, and leave me de rest, vor dot is but right."

The old battle commenced, shrieks for help, imprecations, appeals for mercy, then the gurglings as of a man being choked.

"Strikes me it's Jack Ketch he is struggling with just now," remarked Rainbow, as he went over and gave him a shake. "Being half executed each night, even for a score of murders, is no light punishment for a man."

The miserable German sprang half up from his blanket with a yell of horror, and then, as he woke and recognised us, he muttered,—

"I vos dreaming, I tink."

"About the gold?"

"Yes, about some gold dot I once had—and lost. Vos I speaking mush in my sleep?"

"Yes, a little that way."

"I shall not disturb you any mores to-night. I only dream once. Guid-nacht to you."

"Good-night. We'll turn in also, Luck."

The next morning I left them pegging out their claim, and walked over the range, from about half-way down the gully, and with the aid of a pocket compass soon found the trail which led to Fernwood, and after three hours' walking landed upon them about lunch time. We were nearer the

station by a good eight miles than we had been when living at Wood's Point.

I delivered my messages to Jessie and Mr Condon, and while the horses were being sought out and saddled I had an hour all alone with Sabina. She was delighted to hear about the mysterious gully, and trusted that we would soon be over again with the nuggets. About three o'clock I left them, riding one horse and leading the other two behind me, arriving at the camp all safely before sundown, where I found my comrades still busy, Schopenhauer breaking the ground of the sham claim, Rainbow finishing the stables, and Dicky preparing a wallaby stew.

"You'll have to ride over to Wood's Point to-morrow, Dicky, and get some provisions for us and provender for the horses," said Rainbow, as he put the finishing touches to his shed and helped me in with the horses. After this we knocked off and sat down to supper.

I cannot think upon anything pleasanter than daybreak in the bush of Australia, with the dew drenching everything, and all so cool, lightsome, and fresh that the late sleeper leaps up from his blankets like a modern Adam waking in the midst of a new Eden all his own. He stretches himself, as Adam might have stretched himself, preparatory to taking his bath in one of the four rivers, and then plunging into one of the night-cooled waterholes, rises up as nude and as shameless as our progenitor may have emerged before Eve came on the scene. There was no Eve near in this lonely gully, so that we were generally able to take a little nude exercise, while our skins were drying after our bath, without any dread of offending the proprieties.

Otto Schopenhauer had as great an aversion to cold water as he had to snakes. A very simple rub with a damp towel and an early morning pipe sufficed him before breakfast—when he did trouble so far;—the aroma of the boiling tea, however, generally roused him from his heavy matin sleep, then he would emerge from the folds of his blanket, which had mostly worked up and enveloped his head about waking time, with a grey, sodden, puffy face, and bleary, blue eyes, which blinked at the rising sun and general company drearily, as if to say, "Anoder hanging match got over safely—anoder twelve hours' reprieve bevore me. Not moosh time, and hardly worth the waking vor."

It was a miserable face which greeted us that morning on our return from the waterhole, and a shivering, if stout-built, figure which crouched over the camp-fire, as he puffed at his well-coloured meerschaum and gave a few directions to Dicky.

"Ven you goes to down, look out vor a hams, Dicky. I likes a raw slice in the mornings, and don't say no word of where we are cambing."

Dicky merely nodded to these directions, and went on silently with his preparations for breakfast.

After we had seen the discreet boy off, with a packhorse alongside of him, we crept up the sides of the hill and through our branch-covered gateway to the private gully—the El Dorado of our expectations.

Here Schopenhauer, after a vain endeavour to recall that portion of his dream which had been wiped out, as to the exact locality, brought his practical knowledge to help us in our search.

"It was all in one pocket, nod two feet below the sorvace, dot I saw it in my dreams, somewheres in this gully. Big nuggedds all togedder, as if they had been buried in one small grave. No madder, we shall vind 'em before long, vor we shall not dig deep, and so we can go over the gully till we come to the right spot."

Under his directions we started each upon a separate hole a few feet distant, and worked towards each other, going down about four feet at most, and throwing the dirt to one side, and then when we had done this we spent the rest of the day washing out the earth which we had thrown up.

The result was satisfactory enough on this first day, and proved to us that we were upon payable enough ground, for we began our task on the lower bed of the stream, intending to work up the sides when the rain season came on if we did not reach our special find before that. When we weighed the dust we had washed out we found, with small nuggets and specks, that we had six ounces and a half, that is, about twenty-eight pounds ten shillings worth of gold, or over seven pounds sterling each for our first day of work, which was something to congratulate ourselves upon, although Schopenhauer was discontented about it.

"Only seven pounds dree and four pence each. If we had been dree pardners it would have been nine pounds

eleven shillings, one benny over," he muttered to himself, as he sat moodily smoking and looking at the blazing logs.

Dicky had reached home before us with the provisions and fodder, and had also brought up a week's batch of papers, so, lighting a candle apiece, we left the unsociable Teuton to calculate upon what profits might have been realised could we have done without our cash partner, and spent the rest of the evening apart from him reading the news.

The great breach of promise case had come off, and the plaintiff had won his case, with a farthing damages, expenses to be paid by both sides.

He had been his own advocate, as I supposed he would be, and had so badgered the witnesses and chaffed the counsel for the defendant that he had been glad to sit down conquered and completely out of countenance.

The reporters of the legitimate newspapers had forgiven the bold larikin for his former encroachments upon their grounds in consideration of the fun and material he had provided them with. At this great trial there were whole columns filled with audacious and lively questions and answers, and whenever the ex-editor of the pirate journal got on his legs the court house had been transformed into a comedy theatre.

The costumes were described. First, the fashionable get-up of the double-dealing Miss Rosalind, who might have won more sympathy had her victim been six feet in height instead of three feet eight inches; or even then, being a woman and good-looking, she might have won over the jury, if her opponent had been any other than this airy, cynical, and shameless Melbourne boy and she had not turned sulky. But with him her case was hopeless, from the moment he grinned over his audience and took his stand upon the chair provided for him. So perfectly was he dressed, so gracefully did he fence, that, as the report said, only Charles Mathews could at all approach him, so that what would have covered another man with shame, converted him into the favourite of the hour. The report closed with the announcement that the members of the You-Yang Club were getting up a public dinner and a purse in honour of and to defray the legal expenses of their unfortunate *confrère*. Stringy Bark was a spirit which could not be long kept in bottle.

In one point, however, the deceived lover, or rather his

too trusting jeweller, had been defeated. No law in the land could force the haughty Rosalind to give back her presents, and no amount of swearing or chaffing on the part of the plaintiff was able to rouse her patrician pride or indignation to that foolish extent. She had sulked, but stuck like an octopus to her prey, and finally retired, as the Highlanders may have done from Culloden, conquered, but not impoverished. What she had gleaned by the way she bore off with her to pastures new.

We saw in another portion of the papers that Ovinus Hardwake had been examined, and committed to stand his trial in six weeks' time from then. The evidence of the wig and beard was all complete; his motives alone for the crime were as yet unknown.

Our own case was only slightly mentioned. The public were informed that Captain Rainbow was still at large, and committing fresh depredations in the Wimmera district. It was supposed that he and his gang were working their way towards New South Wales or Western Australia, and the authorities were strongly advised by the papers to watch the coastboard closely in these colonies for their reappearance. Rainbow groaned when he read this account, and said, as he laid down the paper savagely,—

“Do the duffers imagine those outrages to be the work of Rainbow, this tying up of women and setting fire to cattle sheds? I expect that wholesale murders will be going on next now that they are working for themselves and using the old name.”

Schopenhauer, not being a reader of colonial news, was at this time outside with Dicky setting snares for the rabbits, so that we were free to talk.

“When they do start the butchering game I shall get the credit of it all the same, I suppose. That's their revenge for me leaving them.”

“Never mind, we can prove your innocence, Graham, and so long as they stick to the Wimmera district we are fairly safe up here.”

On the front page of the *Argus* another of Stringy's brilliant novelties, in the form of an advertisement, appeared,—“Wanted a capitalist to assist in the preliminary expenses of a first-class dramatic company about to start on a provincial tour.—Apply to Manager, S. B., You-Yang Club.”

Rainbow laughed as I read this out to him, and remarked,—

“He will raise his capitalist, too, I have no doubt, for I daresay he knows a few of his late master’s secrets, so I expect we shall see his company shortly at Wood’s Point.”

“Possibly, and himself playing leading parts.”

“That goes without saying. Well, I think I’ll turn in now for the night.”

The next day we again worked on our old system, starting from the part where we left off the day before and making another trench. Result this night four ounces five grains, and another night of discontent from the German. We also routed out and destroyed three black snakes and a deaf adder, upon which Schopenhauer had nearly set his foot, and who afterwards was in such a state of nerves in consequence that his ghastly dream came to him earlier, and seemed an extra realistic one. If it were the ghosts of his victims who were haunting him they must have been implacable souls.

Next day we struck upon a richer patch, and cleared out of one pocket about a dozen nuggets, varying from quarter of an ounce to nearly three ounces, making us richer by a hundred and twenty pounds. Schopenhauer was grimly humorous that night before he yielded his spirit up to his midnight tormentors.

“By Jove, I wish we could find the large pocket and split partnership with that fellow,” cried Rainbow, as we both woke up and listened to his shrieks. “He will end by making me actually nervous.”

Next day the washings did not yield us half an ounce, while the day after that the result was almost nil, then again we came upon a patch of richer stuff; and so on, fluctuating from good to bad, for the next three weeks, at the end of which time the rains came on and we were forced to work on a higher level, with results not generally so good.

At the close of the three weeks we reckoned up and found that we had close upon fifteen hundred pounds worth of gold, and decided that it should be packed up and taken over to Fernwood for safety. Altogether we were not dissatisfied with our claim. One hundred and twenty-five pounds per week each was not to be despised even by impatient gold-seekers.

I waited behind at the hut with Dicky while Graham and Schopenhauer went over with the gold. The German

would not trust the other with the gold alone ; he insisted on going and seeing it safely placed, and on getting a proper receipt made out for it by Mr Condon.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE DREAM OF SCHOPENHAUER.

WHEN Schopenhauer returned from Fernwood he was very depressed, and could hardly be forced to utter a word, but went about sighing audibly and hanging his head with a very desponding sort of droop.

The nuggets had been safely conveyed and received by Mr Condon, who weighed them carefully and gave a correct receipt for them. This receipt the German had now in his pocket-book, but that did not satisfy him much. The gold, over which he had been used to spend the evening, weighing with our scales and dividing into four portions, was not there, and the paper acknowledgment failed to give him any comfort.

"Dere might be bushrangers come to dot station and break oben de safe. I dink it would havè been best if we had buried it close by, instead of risking it so far away."

"And some stranger might have discovered our hiding-place if we had buried it. Be quite content, Otto ; the gold is as safe over at Fernwood as it would be at the bank."

We had four days wet weather after this, almost continuously, which filled the stream and prevented us doing much. Then the weather cleared up once more, while the water in the hidden gully made its escape by a number of crevices in the rock, and rushed down in a dozen of tiny waterfalls from below the ledge into the stream, which now poured alongside our hut ; this turn of rain being a sort of first warning that summer was finishing up. We would have a few weeks more of dry weather and then the floods would be down upon us, and we would have to shift our camp for a month at least.

On the first dry day we went back again to our gully. The boulders in the channel were mostly covered with the discoloured water which had ran into it from the sides, and fresh watercourses were formed in the loose earth, with a rock or two dislodged since we had seen it last. The stream in some parts was deep enough now to drown a man, but it was being drained rapidly down by those escapes in the

rock. Very soon should we be able to grub once more amongst the mud and sand in the bottom.

Meantime we continued to work as close to the water's edge as we could, both for the sake of easy washing and because we knew that gold was likeliest to be found at the lowest level, that is, alluvial gold.

We met with fair success, considering our present disadvantages, seldom coming back to camp without a few specks in our wash-leather bag, enough to feed up our hopes for better things to come.

Wherever we saw a stoppage of rocks in the hill-side we dug as close to the upper side of them as possible, sometimes going five or six feet down before we changed our hole at Otto's request.

"No good going down farder; de nuggets I want lie close to de top"

We had too much faith now in his dream to contest the point, so we began afresh, and stuck to our work like Trojans.

The first moon had risen over us and faded, to be replaced with a second since we had been together, and now it was getting on to its full lustre, hanging above our camp at nights like a great electric lamp, with the silver-edged clouds drawing round it, and making that solemn gully appear like a transformation scene. It was so beautiful and so deliciously cool of a night that we could wish for nothing better than to sit outside on the ground, with our backs against the shingles, and think upon what they were doing over at Fernwood. Watching that large white moon, doubtless, as we were doing—at least we liked to fancy that the girls would be thus engaged.

Otto Schopenhauer, however, was not in love, except perhaps with the absent nuggets, and he did not care much for moonlight, so that he generally went to bed soon, for want of anything better to do, and I fancy also to get over his nightmare before we turned in. He liked us to waken him out of it before it got too far, and this we were always glad enough to do for our own sakes.

On this night he was lying down inside out of the moon-ray, while we sat at the door, full in the silvery blaze, smoking our pipes silently, as men do who have been long together and who have said all they know already to each other.

"Schopenhauer is not so noisy to-night; perhaps he is

dreaming again about the big nuggets. Let's go in and listen. He may say something that will give us a hint about what he always forgets afterwards," remarked Rainbow, as some low mutterings reached our ears from the German's corner. So we both went inside, and, without lighting the candle, sat down close beside him.

He was not flinging about as usual, but lay quiet enough, with his hands clutching at the blanket and his eyes staring open. This we noticed as our eyes got accustomed to the obscurity, and he was speaking quietly, and with pauses between the sentences, as if answering questions. Outside we could see, through the open door, the landscape lighted up, and the glisten of the moon on the stream, now fast settling down to its normal size.

"There is no chances of a rebrieve you say, father—eh?"

We knew that the religion of his childhood had been Roman Catholic.

"He is thinking of making his last confession," whispered Rainbow; "let us listen to it."

"No hopes, and to-morrow I will be hanged, and if I don't confess, go to hell?"

The unseen priest answered him during the pause which ensued, for he continued speaking in a sullen, passionless voice.

"Vell, I am guilty, and dis is how it happened. I vos hard up and in debt, and he wos put into my place, the place which I had left Germany to take. He was a gentlemans, and had goot friends to back him up, and I had none. Den he pities me and offers me de place next to him, and takes me with him as his assistand, and makes me hate him becose of his sharp tongue. He never lost a shanse to make me feel mean and small, and I had to put up with it because he had de moneys and I wos only his assistant. One day he say to me we shall go over and have a picnic at Goad Island on Sunday, dot was ten mile away from where we wos cambing, and I knows dot he had got a big draft cashed the day bevore, so I said I would go with him on Sunday, dot was the next day, father."

It was a common-place recital so far, told in a dull, dreamy way by a dull German, who had been forced into speaking by an English confessor, and uttered it with no more feeling than a rustic boy might repeat his lesson.

"Dere wos five of us went away to dot picnic over the water—my master, mineself, and dree boadmen. My master took wid him his revolver, to have a shot at de birds, but I had noding. It was early mornings when we went away, and all de rest of de camb wos asleep, so dot no ones saw us leave.

"When we reached Goad Island my shief said he would like a swim, and de dree boadmen say they would like a swim also, and as I could nod swim dey tell me to stay in de boad and watch dere cloes, which I did.

"Den dey got into de water from de boad, and were swimming aboud, when all at once I thought dot this was de right dime to pay off old scores, and get de money I needed, so I took up de revolver, and when I saw it was loaded I let fly at each of de heads as they wos bobbing about.

"De dree boadmen sank at once, bud aldough I fired dree dimes at my shief I only hit him once, but without killing him right off, so dat he swims towards me with de blood running over his eyes, and made a clutch at de side of de boad.

"Den I took up de oar and struck him once, twice, dree dimes afore he lot go and sank down.

"Dey wos all lying in less nor two fadoms of water, inside de reef for fear of de sharks outside, so dot I could see dem easy where dey lay at the boddom, with the bright sun shining down, and I knew dis would never do, derefor I took de boadhook, and fixing it to de boad mast I fished dem up one afder de odder, and pud dem into de sail, wheres I rolled dem up, and den I pulled ashore for some stones.

"It was a lonely blace, and I thought no one was dere undil I got in, when I suddenly see a man waiting for me with a revolver in his fist, which he poinded at me, and made me get out while he took all de money dot wos in de dead man's pockets, and den he walked away and left me to do de best I could.

"It was now about twelve o'clock, and de odder mainland wos not far off, so I took de stones, and tying dem in wid de bodies, I pulled out to de deep waters and dropped dem over. It wos a hard job to get them all over, but wid de mast as a lever I did it at last, and den dey all went to de boddom, deep down, where no one ever see dem again.

"After dis I washed out de blod, and pulled in shore to de mainland, where I landed de boad on some rocks, and

broke a hole in her side wid some rocks, den I wend ashore wid de lunch and had my dinners.

"Just as I was eading my dinners I saw a man on horse-back coming up, and when I saw him I ran and hid myself in de scrub.

"I saw him come up and look ad de boad, and den he shouded and cooeed once or dwice, and after dot ride away. Den I knew dot I must nod go back to dot boad, but must lose myself as soon as bossible. So I went off indo de bush, and walked and walked vor days before I med anyone. Dot's all."

The confession was no longer commonplace, although told in that dull, unimpassioned, sleeping voice. As I shuddered and shrank from the dreaming monster, he spoke again—the imaginary priest had asked him a question, and he was answering.

"No, I wos no richer den bevore, bot boorer, for I had no home and no situation—dot thief took all de money." Another long pause, and then he spoke again. "Tank you, fadder, for your absolution. I can now go to sleeb. Guid-nacht."

He turned his ghastly face to the wall as he spoke, away from the moonbeam, that had by this time stolen through the doorway, and was now touching his back lightly with the silver lustre. Black shadows fell from him on to the bark sides of the hut, but his neck was still illuminated.

Where we sat it was buried in shadow, and too dark to see my companion's face, but I knew that he was still waiting and listening for what might next come. I could see Dicky outside, lying at full length a little way from the door, with his dark eyes fixed on the moon; while, for myself, a fascination of horror held me to my place, and kept me from breaking that weird stillness.

For fully ten minutes we sat thus, and then Schopenhauer rose up from his blanket, in his shirt and trousers, and with his socks only on. What would he next do or say? He passed by us, and went over to where his pick and spade, tied together, were hanging, and slinging them over his shoulder—the spade on one side and the pick on the other—he stepped softly towards the door, and stood waiting for a moment, with his bare head held down, as if listening to something, and a crafty smile on his thin lips. This I noticed distinctly, for the moon was shining full upon him. He

was still dreaming, with his eyes staring blindly and like opaque glass.

"No one here. Now I shall ged de nuggets all to mine-self—uch!"

He moved, after muttering these words, swiftly down to the water's edge, and crossing by the stones, went up towards the hidden claim by the way which we always took, and as he went we followed in his tracks, for even Dicky seemed roused at last by curiosity.

Up the cliff face, with as sure a grip as if he had been awake, and through the branches of the fallen gum trees, on to the ledge, and over the boulders, now covered in blackness, Otto Schopenhauer went, as silently as a spectre, with only the sound, now and then, of the metal ringing as his tools came in contact with the rocks.

At the inner gully end of the ledge we all stopped and waited, peering downwards. We were none of us quite bold enough to follow him down that dark and dangerous path, so we listened to the clanking of the spade and pick as they struck against the stones, and watched for his next appearance.

The moon was high above us, and penetrated into one side of the gully, reaching even to the stream at the bottom, while where we stood was in deepest shadow, as was also the left hand side. If he crossed the stream we would not see him, but if he kept to the right we should very soon be able to trace his course.

In a little time he came within our range; he was not going to cross the stream, he was going up the right side—the side we mostly worked upon.

The same thought, I daresay, entranced us three. Having made his peace with Heaven, his dream had changed to the old dream of the nugget pocket, and he was now on the way to it, thinking to get it all to himself and defraud us of our share. Having made his peace for past crimes with Heaven, he was about to do what most of us are apt to do under such circumstances, turn over a new leaf and begin again with the old blots. What a patient Heaven it is to weak humanity, and how we try it to the uttermost as long as we are able.

He was in the full light now, casting dark and fantastic shadows of man and dangling tools to his right, and getting over the ground without a pause of indecision,

picking his way, in his stockened feet, amongst the boulders, and parting the tendrils and brushwood in his way, while we watched him from our perch above.

He went a long way past our usual working place. Still the light was strong enough for us to trace his motions, although we could no longer hear the sound of his tools when they clashed. Then we saw him take an abrupt turn upwards, until he reached the underside of a cluster of quartz rocks, upon which the moonlight was shining, and above which grew a solitary ti-tree, with some tendrils and roots hanging over.

He had reached his spot, for he took the spade and pick from his shoulders, and untying them, flung them down, while he paused to roll up his shirt sleeves workmanlike.

Next we saw him starting work, the pick first in his hands breaking through the hard soil, and then, when he had loosened enough, shovelling it out with the spade, and pitching the earth to one side, working leisurely, and examining each spadeful carefully before he threw it away.

True enough, as he had said so often, it did not seem longer nor wider than a grave he was now digging all alone there by himself, with the pale moon shining over him. As I watched him pick out the ground to the size he wanted, from our distance, it appeared to be startlingly like a gravedigger at work.

He had thrown up the first layer of soil, and again the pick was at work, and once more he took up the spade and threw out the earth, which was rising above him, so that the lower part of his legs were hidden from us.

Once more the spade was flung down and the pick taken up. I counted the strokes, though I could not hear them fall.

One, two, three, four, five.

At the fifth stroke he paused, with the pick still down and his body straining as if he were tugging at it to get it out, and then all at once he fell upon his knees and genuflected to the earth, rising a moment afterwards with a heavy weight in his arms, and staggering out of the hole he had made.

"By the Lord, I believe he has got it," cried Rainbow, in his excitement clutching my arm and stretching out his neck to watch the German so far off from us, yet so distinctly seen in his silent pantomime.

We saw him stagger a few paces from the hole with that weight in his arms, then he laid it down in front of him, and again dropping on his knees, appeared to look at it closely.

He remained kneeling, with that stone or nugget in front of him, for a long time, then gradually he sank down beside it, and putting his arms languidly round it, lay passively, with the moonlight streaming over him.

"He has gone to roost alongside of his find, Luck. Let us leave him there until daybreak," said Rainbow at length. "Come, old boy, we'll find out what he has in the morning. He is comfortable there, and I have supped enough of horrors for one night."

Saying which he led the way back to our hut, where we flung ourselves down on our blankets, and were soon in the land of Nod.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

FOUR HUNDRED AND EIGHTY-FOUR THOUSAND POUNDS.

WE were not thinking so much about Otto Schopenhauer's welfare the next morning when we woke up, as about his find, and the probability of taking him unawares at his pocket before he could sneak away or be able to secrete it.

Knowing Otto's habit of late rising, we were not at all surprised, when we reached the ledge, to find him still slumbering in the early dawn, in the same position in which we had left him at midnight, with his arms still tenderly embracing that nugget, if it was a nugget. Rainbow had taken the precaution to stick his revolver in his belt before we started.

"Otto will likely cut up a little rough when he wakes and discovers that he has led us to this precious pocket, so best be prepared since we know that he respects this toy." Before we began our scramble down Rainbow again offered his advice. "Don't disturb him for a bit. Best let him rouse up gradually and see us at work, then we can pitch it into him that we have come on the spot by accident."

This was not honest advice, but it was wisdom for all that, so we were careful not to disturb the sleeper as we walked straight up to the hole and began to examine it, getting our tools ready for action, and without more than a glance in his direction.

"Dicky, go over to him quietly and see what he has got. If you can carry it, bring it over here."

While Dicky was obeying orders we stooped down and examined the hole. It was curiously like the shape of a grave, oblong and narrow, but he had not gone deeper than two feet.

The earth was all broken up with the pick, so that we both took our spades, intending to throw up the soil, when with one impulse we stopped and looked at each other.

"Mighty weighty for earth—eh, Luck?"

"Yes," I replied, and then both our foreheads came into contact as we flopped upon our knees and scrambled amongst those broken up lumps, like schoolboys after oranges. In a moment afterwards we were looking at each other with open mouths and starting eyes.

"Gold, by Jupiter!"

It was Rainbow who uttered the hoarse cry, for I was too agitated to utter an exclamation. The lump I had in my hands I could hardly lift; but, then, one cannot lift an unexpected weight so easily as when we are prepared to make a strain.

"Well, Dicky, is Schopenhauer still sleeping?"

This from Rainbow as Dicky appeared once more quietly at our side.

"Yes, very sound," replied the boy.

"Did you get the nugget from him?"

"No, I could not lift it."

"Luck, my boy, there is enough here for the whole boiling of us without going further. Let's wake the finder up and tell him his good news without delay."

Dicky went over with us to where the German lay, without a muscle of his face moving, and, touching him on the leg with his foot, carelessly said,—

"That skunk sound enough asleep, you bet. Deaf-adder bit him last night."

For a moment we could hardly believe it until we saw the swollen and blackened face below us. Otto Schopenhauer had made his confession first, and then died with the finding of what he had so long smirched his soul to gain.

Inside the arms, now three times their natural size, lay a nugget, fully fifty pounds weight, of the purest gold, while in the grave he had begun to dig was more than we could yet estimate. Both the dreams of Otto Schopenhauer had come to pass in one night—his wonderful dream "pocket" and his nightmare execution.

Perhaps, however, that visionary confession had been the means of making his latter end an easy one, for the fate of the deaf-adder bitten is a pleasant sleep and a drowsy drifting away into immortality. A slight prick, which might not be noticed at the time, is all the pain experienced by the victim, and then gradually a resistless desire to lie down and rest, as he had done the night before. Snake poisoning is perhaps the most painless and pleasant of all deaths, for the snake never gives his patient an overdose.

But for all that, the snake bitten is an ugly spectacle eight or ten hours after the spirit has found release, as was the case with Schopenhauer. His posture was reposeful enough, but every limb was puffed out, discoloured, and already beginning to poison the air. It would be impossible to carry him out of that gully, or leave him for many hours longer above ground.

Therefore, after removing that heavy lump of gold from his vicinity, we cut down a number of young gum leaves and covered him with them, until we could make the grave which he had begun deep enough to hold him. So, having hidden the putrefying mass of late humanity from our eyes, we settled down to the more pleasing task of emptying that pocket, for the first time opened to a pair of grateful and needy adventurers.

Fifty pounds was the largest nugget, and that Schopenhauer had been permitted to handle first; but there were many others, ranging from twenty pounds down to a couple of ounces, none under that weight, and all lying glued together with the caked clay. We had only to give two or three strokes with our picks and then they fell apart, while all we had to do was to lift them up and pile them on the grass like a pyramid. Soft, heavy, dirty looking masses, clumsily formed like water-worn stones, and showing here and there a dull yellow glitter where we had rubbed them.

For three hours we worked without stopping, lifting out these precious lumps and piling them up, and then the supply became suddenly exhausted. We had got out the last tiny nugget, and after this the earth came out free enough, as we dug down to a depth of about eight or nine feet. About midday our task was completed, and the pocket was ready to receive its new burden.

A layer of leaves was spread over the bottom, and then,

holding our breaths in as we approached the body, we lifted it and lowered it as gently as we could. There was nothing in the trousers pockets to remove, and Otto had not endeared himself to us greatly in life, so that, although we ought to have felt grateful to him as the giver of our fortune, we flung in the leaves and covered him up hastily without venturing a second look at his face.

At last we could lay down our spades, and while taking our first smoke look at our wonderful pyramid. The earth lay smooth over the treasure hole, with the quartz boulders at its head forming a better tombstone than we could have set up.

"How much do you reckon is there, Graham?"

"Enough to enable us all to roll in the downy bed of luxury for the rest of our lives. Now that Otto Schopenhauer has dissolved partnership, I should calculate over four hundred thousand pounds apiece for the three remaining partners," replied Rainbow gravely.

I gasped for breath. In my wildest dreams I had not hoped for a fortune of this extent.

"Enough to do anything almost, except get me out of Australia—even money cannot accomplish that, I fear."

"It can do a lot towards it, though, old fellow; it will enable Mr Condon to purchase a ship for this purpose, and take it to the loneliest part of the coast for you, which gives us a hundred chances to one that we had before."

"Perhaps," replied Rainbow gloomily, as he looked at the pile and puffed heavily at his pipe. Then after a pause he sprang to his feet, briskly saying, "Well, we'd best be making a start, and get some of that stuff over the wall before sundown; and while we are doing it Dicky had better ride over to the station and get some more pack-horses. It will take a good half-dozen to transport it over the mountains."

We made two journeys with as much as we could carry, and then packing them up inside two strong flour sacks, we slung them over the back of one of the horses, while Dicky, riding another, went off towards Fernwood.

"You had best stay one night at the station, Dicky, and ask Mr Condon to come with you to-morrow, as he is a magistrate and can give us a clearance about the German," said Rainbow, as the boy was going. "We'll get as much of

the metal up to the ledge to-day as we can, and be ready for you in the morning."

Neither of us thought about preparing tea that afternoon. We munched a piece of damper, and washed it down with a drink of water, then back again to work. When men have gold for the lifting, it is astonishing how much they can carry without feeling the exertion.

All that long afternoon we passed from the grave to the ledge, using our blankets as sacks, and hauling them up the cliff with ropes tied round them; and when night came on we decided to sleep beside our treasure, so spreading our blankets on to the rocks, and using a nugget or two for pillows, we smoked our second pipe that day, and fell asleep supperless, for we had neither of us a bit of appetite.

The next morning we were up at dawn and at it again, hauling our last load up about nine o'clock.

"We may as well have some breakfast now, and wait till the horses come," said my companion; and beginning to feel the need of something to eat after our long fast, I followed him down to the hut, where together we started the fire and boiled our tea, besides broiling a few rashers of the ham, which Schopenhauer had ordered; then we set to and made a hearty meal, and afterwards were able to lie on our backs and enjoy to the full the luxury of rest after hard labour.

"Well, Luck, my boy, your days of sundowning and uncertainty are over at last, for Condon will soon be able to square the Government about your little offence, and then you and Sabina may go home and enjoy yourselves. A mighty easy bit of gold-digging that was at the last, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Graham; but I must see you out of the hole also before I enjoy myself. We must all take French leave together from this blessed colony, and set up housekeeping in some safe country."

"Ay," answered Rainbow absently. "Curious chap that Schopenhauer with his dreams, wasn't he?"

"Very."

"Almost a spiritualistic medium, I should reckon. Devilish unluckily also—eh?"

"Yes; he started off with crime, you see, so could not expect success," I replied thoughtlessly.

"Ay, that's what I've been thinking, Luck; there is a retributive justice, after all, although he managed to dodge the

hangman. He began with sin, and as the Scripture has it, ended with death. I wish, though, that he hadn't brought it right on to that gold, for I cannot help the feeling that it bodes ill for me, a brother criminal."

"Nonsense, Graham, your case is quite different from his; he committed wholesale murder, wantonly and without provocation, while you were forced into your course. There are degrees—"

"Yes, degrees of crime and degrees of punishment. I understand all that. Well, he didn't suffer much at the last, after all. Perhaps I'll be let off as easy. And, as you say, he was a remorseless scoundrel; and if I had been in his place I'd feel glad that it was all over, for I'd have blown out my brains long ago if I had been haunted as he was. Hallo! here come the horses and our partner Condon!"

Mr Condon was coming up the gully at a rapid rate, and for him in a high state of excitement, while behind him rode Dicky, as usual, cool and undisturbed, urging on the packhorses, with empty sacks dangling about their sides.

"I thought it best to come alone, boys, and give you a hand; there is no use 'blowing' our claim, is there?" he cried as he leapt to the ground and shook hands with us warmly.

"Quite right; only I don't think any of us will require to go back to that gold mine after to-day," replied Rainbow.

"It's wonderful—marvellous, by Jingo! I have not slept a wink since Dicky came in with his load. A hundred and ninety pounds solid weight he brought over, less the dirt, of course. I can hardly credit it."

"It's there though, all right, improbable as it may seem."

"One of the greatest dreamers I ever read about; it beats Joseph's patron all to atoms—and he is dead, is he? What a loss to the mining community that Schopenhauer's early death is, to be sure."

The getting down of the gold was a very simple affair, with the dividing of it amongst the horses, so that it was still early afternoon when we turned our backs on our bark hut and said good-bye to that fortunate gully. Mr Condon took with him the coat and a few other effects of the unlucky German—nothing, however, of which gave him any clue to his past history or place of birth. He had been a secretive man all his life, until the ghosts made him speak, and he had kept no letters. The only papers

in his pocket-book were his miner's certificate and the receipt which Mr Condon had given him for the first deposit.

"Of course it was not likely that Schopenhauer was his real name, and as we don't know when he committed the murders—if that also was not a freak of the imagination entirely—I don't know how we are going to trace him out. We'll try, of course, for the fourth part belongs to his relatives, if he has any, and that is all we can do."

What a delightful night that was at Fernwood when we reached there. I had managed to get a chance alone, on the way through the bush, to speak to Mr Condon about Sabina, and he did not linger over his fatherly consent.

"We must get your pardon first, Luck, and then you are welcome to Sabina whenever she likes to leave me," he said frankly. "You are both millionaires now, you know, for I invested this cash in her name, so she is the fourth partner in reality. As soon as we can hit upon a plan to smuggle Graham out of the country I'll go down to Melbourne and interview one or two members of the ministry on your behalf, and until then you can lie low at my place, and amuse yourselves courting."

After this open permission I had no longer any scruples. All my late colonial experiences were trifles compared with my present fortunes. I could now draw a draft and repay my old friend Mr Sampson, take Jim Wood back to my service, and provide for our old shipmates Bessie Walker and Elsie Kemp. What a power of enjoyment there is in gold after all.

I did not want to, but I was forced to go into Mr Condon's office, during the early portion of the evening, and witness the weighing of the nuggets and their locking up. However, both Jessie and Sabina came with us, so that it was a pleasant enough prelude to what came after, that delicious walk in the moonlight.

The safe could not hold a tenth part of our wealth, so Mr Condon lugged in some of his strongest packing-cases from the sheds, and after it was weighed, nailed and banded them up securely.

The weighing machine also was dragged into the office, and when we had locked the doors we proceeded to calculate our fortunes, Rainbow weighing and Mr Condon marking down the figures. Then the adding up took place, and Mr Condon startled us with the stupendous results,

"We have in this room, less the soil about the nuggets, fourteen hundred and eighty-five thousand pounds worth of virgin gold, that is allowing four pounds fifteen shillings per ounce, giving at this rough calculation to each of the four partners nearly four hundred thousand pounds, say, putting it at its lowest figure, three hundred and fifty thousand pounds apiece. I think that ought to satisfy even the most avaricious spirit amongst you. Now let us open a bottle of my own hermitage and drink to this godsend."

"How old is your hermitage?" asked Rainbow gently.

"Five years old, James. The bottle I'm going to open now, it's my first brew, and I don't think you will find it bad—that is, for colonial wine."

"Well, old man, I'll humour you for this once, even if I do suffer afterwards," replied Rainbow, with a resigned air. "A fortune like that is worth even a sacrifice like this. 'Lead on, Macduff, and damned be he who first cries hold, enough.'"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DOCTOR ASTRINGUS BARK, M.D.

I DON'T know that this sudden fortune made much difference in our feelings, or interfered much with the pleasure of our walk that night, if one could call the two or three hundred yards between the house and Sabina's arbour a walk, for that is where we found ourselves after the pounds, shillings, and pence matter was disposed off. I don't fancy that we thought much about it. I know that we did not bring it once into our conversation. As a subject it was not at all to be compared to other matters over which we took a keen interest. In fact we were both so rich, and on such equal ground now, that I felt as contented as I should have been before the fortune had come if she had chanced to have become suddenly as poor as I had been.

"Oh, Luck, my Luck, I am so happy now," she said in a contented way, as she laid her head on my shoulder and looked dreamily out upon the moonlight.

So was I, and that was about the sum total of our conversation for the next two hours, which somehow passed like five minutes, while Bernard lay at our feet in grave majesty,

and restless Gyp, with his original hair once more grown, frisked about the trees, chasing imaginary wild cats and flying foxes.

The next day we rode down with Mr Condon to Wood's Point to register the death of Otto Schopenhauer and purchase some articles of clothing a little more suitable to the guests of Fernwood. Of course we still wore our splendidly fitting beards, which altered our appearance so much, and we gave our assumed names to the casual acquaintances whom our host met and introduced to us.

I was rather nervous, however, when we met the police inspector and he stopped to talk to us about the death, because no matter how well a false beard may fit a man he cannot forget that it is false himself, which is apt to make him very conscious. Besides, I had the customary respect for the detective's acumen, and this present inspector possessed a pair of alert and penetrating eyes. For myself I did not now care much, but I was timid as a hare about my companion.

However, beyond a sharp glance or two in our direction, the inspector addressed his conversation mainly to Mr Condon, from whom he received all the details, with descriptions of Schopenhauer, and then with a sharp nod he was walking away, when suddenly he wheeled about, making my heart leap almost to my mouth as I saw him fix his eyes on Rainbow who sat calm as a guard on duty, without budging a muscle.

"By the way, Condon, are you staying over the night in town?"

"No, I am going back almost immediately. Why?"

"Oh, nothing, only that we have a burlesque company at the Town Hall to-night, which they tell me is good. I thought perhaps you might like to see it. Good-day."

He was gone really this time. I gave a heavy sigh of relief. Was that all which the inspector had wanted to say when he turned about so suddenly? Perhaps so; to move about sharply is a habit of the profession, and they are only human in their ideas of amusement, after all.

We paid our visit to Mr Condon's tailor, and left our measurements and orders, and then, after a visit to one or two other shops, we returned to the hotel, where we had left our horses, to have some lunch.

As we passed along the street I saw a most picturesque vision of an African monarch, with bangles, feathers, assegai

and shield complete, delivering handbills of the coming performance to the admiring natives of this mining centre, and instantly my thoughts reverted to my old friend Stringy Bark. Only a brain like his could have conceived this form of advertisement, and taking one of the bills I looked it over to find that my surmise was correct.

There his own name figured in bold letters at the head of the troupe, as manager of a variety company, a little altered, and with a medical title before it. I read that Dr Astringus Bark, M.D., was about to favour the township of Wood's Point with his famous company of vocal and instrumental lady artistes, and also present to each holder of a ticket a sample bottle of his wonderful discovery, the now famous "Eucalyptus Elixir," the virtues of which he would explain during the interval of the performance.

It was characteristic of the irrepressible one to have two strings to his bow and strike out an original plan of action.

"What do you say, Graham, shall we stay for an hour to-night and see the little genius once more?"

"As you like ; we can ride back in the moonlight."

"All right, I'll leave you after lunch, boys, as I must get home before dark," said Mr Condon. "Bring the Melbourne papers with you ; they'll be in before you leave."

The hotel where Mr Condon put up usually was the best in the town, and here, when we got back, we had the pleasure of beholding the late editor of *The Financial Diver* in his new character.

He was got up, as usual, faultlessly, but in a severe and professional style, in superfine black, with frock coat closely buttoned up to his stiff collar, and only enough left open to display his superb diamond pin, while on his fingers the same scintillating lights sparkled and flashed. With his usual cuteness he had invited some of the leading men to lunch with him, and was, at the moment of our entrance into the commercial room, standing before his guests, who were imbibing their sherry and bitters while they waited on the call to feed, and listening while he expounded the wonderful medicinal uses of his new discovery.

"No, gentlemen, I do not sell my medicine this trip ; I leave it to recommend itself first. With a capitalist at my back such as I have, I can easily afford to give it away gratis. On my next professional visit I will take

orders, but not now. Our manufactory is at present being built for wholesale productions. At present we only manufacture sample bottles for presentation. My troupe of ladies are here to amuse you and improve your minds at so much per head. I aim at destroying disease and improving the human system, and my charge is nothing. If the gentleman who represents the local press will take a tip from an old literary stager, who knows a trick or two regarding public tastes, he will put his report in the form of short pars, with asterisks between each, and give the printers direction to make it pica, thick leaded. Excuse me, gentlemen, for using professional language. My friend from the local organ understands my meaning, and you may say, besides, that for all marsh fevers, such as ague, miasma, or hypochondria it is invaluable, taken internally, according to printed directions; externally its curative properties cover all casualties the human frame is liable to, excepting hydrophobia. We draw the line at dog madness, gentlemen. The cure for that is at present under consideration."

"Does it cure snake bites and pistol shots, doctor?" here asked one of the guests, for they are about the commonest casualty in these parts."

"Yes, if applied promptly. Only, in these cases people are apt to lose their heads and waste valuable time; but so long as the bullet or the poison do not get beyond the probing qualities of my 'Eucalyptus Elixir,' you may depend upon an instant and efficacious cure. Come, gentlemen, I perceive that lunch is waiting."

It was the same Stringy, but in a new character. He was no longer the larky larikin or the supercilious and arrogant editor, or the cynical and amusing advocate. He was now the gravely suave and insinuating professor of medicine, with a wonderfully impressive earnestness about him which betokened future success.

"When that phenomonen dries up, as he must some day, it will be because he has exhausted general Nature and can no longer suck vitality from Mother Earth," remarked Rainbow from our distant table. "He will first create a vacuum and then become one of the immortals."

The performance was fixed for eight o'clock, and so we decided to spend the afternoon inside smoking and reading, and after tea have a stroll round our old haunts and see

how the boys were getting on. We should perhaps hear something about the former doings of Schopenhauer from some of his fellow-workers, therefore about six o'clock we went out of the hotel and sought the digger's shanty which we had been used to patronise.

None of the boys had arrived when we got there, so, after having a pleasant chat with the landlord and landlady, we carried our drinks over to a small table and sat down to wait.

The place was nearly empty when we first entered, but by-and-by they began to drop in, until the place was in its usual lively state.

Our glasses being empty, and as Rainbow had done the first "shout," I went over to the bar to get them replenished, leaving Dicky and my companion still sitting.

When I reached the table, however, I found that they had both gone out. Thinking that they would return presently, I set the glasses on the table and sat down.

Not on the chair I had left, however, for it had been withdrawn while my back was turned, so that I landed in an unexpected fashion plump on the floor.

Now when some sportive nymph does this at a country party the unfortunate victim must grin and look as delighted as he can while the laugh travels round, but as I wasn't at a country party, but in a rough shanty, with only parded miners loudly guffawing at my fall, I sprang up in double quick time, with something very like an oath to have it out with my merry trickster, when on getting up I found myself squinting at the stock of a revolver, while the barrel was making a decided impress on my forehead.

Now I had never been so close to a loaded revolver, at least one held up against me, as I stood then, and the effect was very curious. A trickling sensation like cold water running down the small of my back suddenly became apparent, with a rigid contraction of the facial muscles. In that sudden and paralysing current of terror I must have actually grinned, for I heard a husky voice growl,—

"Wot the adjective adjective are you laughing at? D'ye fancy it isn't loaded? D'ye think I'm not game enough to scatter your brains—eh?"

"Oh, yes, I think you are game enough," I replied, recovering a trifle of my former pluck as the pistol was removed. "It isn't that I was laughing at."

"Wot then?"

"The idea," I replied.

"Wot idear?"

"That you could find out any brains inside my skull with that bullet of yours."

"Wot, hain't ye got any brains, then?" shouted the voice, with a hoarse laugh.

"Not likely. Do you think if I had an ounce of brains in this cranium that I'd have ventured into such a cursed company of murderers as this is?" I asked scornfully, or rather with a fine assumption of scorn, for my legs were still quivering.

"Come now, mate, I like that; it is bully. I incline to like you for that game answer. Say, what will you have to drink?"

"Nothing," I replied.

"Wot, too conceited to take a drink from an honest man? Then you want it arter all?"

Up went the revolver again, and I instantly relented.

"Oh, yes, rather the 'shout' than the shoot," I replied.

"Come on, then, and take it."

I now looked at my antagonist to find a burly, black-browed, and most ferocious looking individual in top-boots, buckskin pants, and red shirt, with a most enormous black beard streaming over his chest.

He had evidently just come in with half-a-dozen more companions of the same type, who for the present arrogated the premises with their swaggering airs, while the more peaceful diggers hung back a trifle shy. The landlord and landlady looked most uncomfortable behind their bar, yet decidedly intimidated, as I must say I was myself.

"A bottle of yer best brandy to start with, boss," shouted my bearded pistol carrier, as he shoved it back again into his belt, and the liquor was promptly produced and paid for with a bank-note. "Help yourself, sonney. I'm a game man, I am, and when I see gameness, so long as it don't cross my interests, I admire it, and I admire you."

I wonder if there are many heroes in this world who earn a reputation on as slender grounds as I did then. I swallowed my drink meekly, and was edging towards the door, when he saw me and hailed me.

"Wot, you ain't going jest yet, are you?"

"Oh, no; I'll be back in a moment," I replied sweetly.

"That's all right, for I want to get better acquaint with you."

No question as to whether the desire was mutual seemed to cross this egotistical gentleman's mind. He took that for granted naturally.

I had almost reached the door when I was startled to see enter my old enemy Sandy Macintosh, with other two men as villainous as himself, and all dressed like the revolver gentleman at the bar. They were evidently in company, and on the tramp.

Macintosh did not recognise me in my present disguise, so I got outside safely to find Rainbow and Dicky waiting anxiously for me there.

He clutched me by the arm and drew me on rapidly.

"I was nearly committing murder to-night, old fellow, when I saw that brute raise his weapon. Your plucky laugh saved his life, for I had him covered."

"My plucky laugh! God help the heroes if that was pluck," I answered. "I was just ready to drop with downright currish fear."

"That's the best kind of courage, old chap, the man who does not show his fear."

"But why did you go out?"

"Because these men are part of my old gang, the worst portion, and I did not want them to recognise me. That bully ruffian who threatened you was the thorn in my flesh while I was with them."

"I don't wonder at it."

"They have split the band, I fancy, and are up to no good here. Did you see Macintosh?"

"Yes; as I came out he entered."

"We must find out what they are after in this locality and stop their game."

"I will find out," said Dicky quietly.

"All right, Dicky boy, go and watch them, and then come to us. You know where we'll be?"

"Yes, at the Town Hall," replied Dicky, as he left us silently.

"Aren't you afraid of risking that boy's life, Graham?" I asked, wondering that he could let him go back to such a company so coolly.

"No. Dicky is worth a hundred of them for smartness. He will shadow them so closely that if they only whisper together he'll be able to hear them without being discovered. I have no fear for Dicky when he takes the job in hand."

The performance had commenced when we reached the hall, so that we could only get standing room at the back. That bonus had tempted a large audience to come, for it did not seem like money wasted when one could get both amusement and medicine for the same entrance fee. Artful Stringy Bark.

The performance had also been chosen with a keen knowledge of his countrymen's tastes. Twenty good-looking, well-developed girls appeared together on the stage in satin jerkins and silk tights, with the silver spangles lavishly spread over. Before even they had opened their mouths or touched their instruments they had conquered the hearts of the audience with their generous display.

Some of them could sing and play a little. That is, Stringy was taking them through some of the small towns first while they were learning their parts, but they were all audacious, and exhibited their charms without any prudish affectation, so that none of the male members of the audience were disposed to be critical, while the females had already been won over by this present of patent medicine. What this master had yet to learn in the art of playing upon the vanities and weaknesses of human nature was infinitesimal, that is, when he was not himself carried away by his own emotions.

To-night he was superb in his neatness, splendour of jewellery, and inimitable pertness and condescending grace. When the curtain fell upon the first portion of the performance, and he appeared, after his table and paraphernalia had been placed in order by the African king, there was such a burst of enthusiasm, from male and female alike, that the plaster fell down in several places. Colonial plaster is apt to do that, when such an unusual thing as applause greets an orator.

Silence once more, after that burst, and the little hero rose, calm, unsmiling, and undisturbed by cheers or rattling plaster, his gold-rimmed eyeglass jammed between his wrinkles, with an open sample bottle poised aloft between

finger and thumb, and the other hand nestling for the present behind the third loosed buttonhole of his frock coat, while we leaned against the back wall, so as to enjoy the coming speech more at our ease.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this already world-famed 'Elixir' which I now hold in my hand is—"

A gentle touch at Rainbow's arm made us both turn round to see Dicky beside us.

"Come at once outside," he whispered, and we had to forego the treat which Stringy Bark was about to give us and leave the hall.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

GYP IN A NEW CHARACTER.

WHEN we got to the open and almost deserted street Dicky stopped and looked at his master. We were standing now full in the moonlight.

"Go on, Dicky, with your yarn."

"I watched them leave the shanty," said the boy steadily, "and followed them out to the bush, two miles from here—over there." He pointed in the direction of Fernwood.

"Yes, Dicky, go on."

"They squatted when they got into the bush, for a drink and a smoke. Dan Dolan is their leader, and Sandy Macintosh the tout, and they are going to tackle Fernwood. Sandy Macintosh put them up to it. He knows Sabina Condon, and means to go in and ask a night's lodgings, and then let the rest in."

"The infernal scoundrel," I said savagely.

"There's an old sundowner in the game as well. He has gone on in front, and will give them the signal if all goes well; and they must have started."

"Have they got horses?" asked Rainbow.

"No; they have tramped up this length. They mean to get them at the station, and go on to the Blue Mountains."

"Then we have time to get there before them. Come on, Luck; we must ride fast, to-night."

"They have got rifles as well as revolvers," observed Dicky quietly, as he fell back a pace, while we hurried on to the hotel stables, got out our horses, settled our reckon-

ing, and then rode off into the moonlight as if doing a steeplechase.

"Had they started when you left them, Dicky?" asked Rainbow, as we galloped over a field so as to get quicker to the road.

"No; you know Dan Dolan. When he has a bottle of brandy beside him he'll budge for no one until he has emptied it; but they will be on the way now, for they intended to get to the station before bedtime."

A leap over a high fence stopped for a moment the conversation, then, as we once more settled on to the road, Graham continued,—

"They must be over the ridge by this time, and a mile to the other side by the time we reach up to them. They ought to be within five miles of Fernwood. I know just about where we shall pass them, if all goes well. Give us the particulars, Dicky. What about that sundowner?"

"They sent him ahead yesterday morning, as it is a two days' walk for a sundowner. If the place is safe, that is, not too many men about, he was to hang his blanket out to dry on the fence; that was to be the signal that they could come on. Then, while the rest hung about till midnight, Macintosh was to walk up to the door, and, on the strength of his former acquaintance with Miss Condon, ask a night's shelter with the family, so that while the sundowner opened the door of the stockmen's quarter Macintosh was to let them into the house. If the blanket was out, they were to know that the men about the station were less in numbers than themselves. He was to manage to get at their weapons and damp the cartridges."

"Noble sundowner!" I said. "I wonder if it is the great original. It would be a feat worthy of his rearing, and from his own calculations he ought to be about this length since we parted at the Rose in Bloom."

"Possibly," answered Rainbow. "Has he any fighting in him?"

"I don't fancy much."

"Because he will have to do a little to-night for his treachery, or at least act as a barricade."

"He'll do for that nicely, if you can prop him up; he is big and fat enough to shield a good-sized man."

We had now reached the ridge, and had to walk our

horses up the steep bridle track until we reached the top, and then down again. At length we were once more on level ground and hurrying forward.

We had one great advantage over the robbers, we knew their plans, and they were not aware of it. Rainbow also knew their peculiarities and habits, which was a big odds on our side.

After about an hour of hard riding we caught sight of them in the distance, filling up the narrow track as they strode along. At the sound of our horses they divided and drew to each side amongst the trees, as if waiting for us to come up and pass.

"Let's walk our horses up to them, for I can see they mean to attack us," said Rainbow. "Have your revolvers ready, and your spurs prepared to dig into your horse's ribs the moment they spring forward to catch our reins; that's the usual method of Dan when he's on foot. Ride them down, and blatter away at them without waiting for their call 'Bail Up.' It's our only chance to get safely past them."

Rainbow pulled his hat firmly over his eyes, and gradually slackened his horse till it came to a steady walk, while we rode abreast, Dicky in the middle. The bushrangers were by this time completely hidden by the shadows of the trees; indeed, if we had not been prepared and on the lookout, besides going over marshy ground at the time we first sighted them, we shouldn't have had even that advantage.

"There are over a dozen of them altogether in that part of the road, seven on each side. Did you see which side Dan took, Dicky?"

"The left."

Rainbow took a steady glance to the left clump of trees, while he slipped over his face a piece of black crape. I suppose from force of habit he had kept this memento of the past in his pocket.

"Now I am going to startle them with an old trick of mine, only I wish I had Prince under me; he is used to all sorts of games."

Prince was at present being pampered in Fernwood stables; he was too celebrated a steed to ride about with on market days if one wanted to keep dark.

"You see yonder first shadow crossing the road?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Walk until your horse's fore legs touch that shadow, then dig in your spurs and ride like fury—don't mind me—I'll join you before you are far on. Don't shoot to the left, though, or you may happen to hit me. Blaze away to the right, as you dash past, and leave me to manage the left-hand party."

I never can decide whether I am a coward or not; I fancy that I have just vanity enough not to shirk a danger, but I can never come up to it deliberately without a shaking of the heart and a trembling of the knees. Of course it is different when the thing comes plump upon a fellow, and the excitement fires one up; anyone may be plucky after he has been welted.

I now paced my horse slowly towards that shadow where the trees begun—where we were passing it had been cleared. The watchers would probably fancy that we were breathing our beasts and not likely to hurry, as we had so lately slackened speed, so that they would wait easy until we were well within the shadows before they began operations. But for all that one could not quite reckon upon their vageries; they might pot us with their rifles in the open, for with that bright moon overhead we were splendid marks. It was the slowness of our horses' movements and such thoughts as these which made my heart feel chill and my knees to shiver.

We were within five feet of that shadow now, and silence still held possession of the copse. I could imagine those twenty-four cruel eyes watching us from the darkness, but I did not look up. I kept my heels out ready to drive the spurs home, and my gaze fixed upon that line, with my revolver hand hidden in my shirt.

"Now," shouted Rainbow, as he suddenly dashed towards the left, straight amongst the trees, while Dicky and I bounded forward at full speed, blazing away at the dusky figures as they rushed from the right side, and in a moment leaving them behind, firing recklessly with their pistols after us.

In another second of time Rainbow burst from the trees and joined us, along the road. Then we tore on, with the rifles cracking away in the distance, and the bullets whizzing past us until a turn of the road covered our retreat.

"All right, you boys?" shouted Rainbow as we galloped on.

"Yes, only I think my horse has got winged. He is snorting heavily. Are you right?"

"I've got one airhole through the thick of my leg, but nothing to speak about. I nailed two of the skunks, but missed Dan Dolan. He prudently got behind a tree. We've just time to prepare for them up at the house."

Shortly after this we rode up to the outer fence, and there sure enough we saw the sundowner's blanket hanging over to dry, or rather catch the dews. It was placed close beside the men's outhouses.

The stockmen were not yet in bed, for we could see their candles burning through the window panes, so with a loud co-ee we brought them to the door.

"You are wanted up at the house to-night, boys," sang out Rainbow, as he stooped over his horse, to the three stockmen as they appeared.

"All right, mate."

"At once. Have you got anyone else there with you?"

"Only a digger on the tramp. He is lying down."

"Fetch him along with you."

"What's up, mates?" said the foreman.

"Bushrangers two miles behind," Rainbow replied rather faintly.

"Ah, then we'd better fetch our weapons?"

"Yes."

At this moment the unlucky digger appeared, dragging himself along, my old friend of the Kilmore Road.

"Did I hear you aright? Did you mention bushrangers, sir?"

"Yes, mate; that's exactly what I did say."

"Then I'd better look after my blanket, in case they smuggle that from the fence; it's not of much value, but it is my all in this dreary world."

"No, leave that blanket where it is; I'll set you up with a new one if it is taken. Come along, my friend."

"But it won't take me a minute to fetch my own blanket. Old associations make it more precious to me than a new one."

"Get on in front of me, my man," said Rainbow sternly, levelling his revolver at the startled sundowner's head, "and no more humbug, or I'll let the moonlight into you double quick."

The unlucky digger made no further efforts to recover his

damp blanket, but trudged along in front of us, murmuring, "Thrown upon a cold world at the age of three, struggling manfully against evil fortune ever since, and now in danger of losing my last relic ; it is hard, hard on an unhappy, but singularly honest man."

Mr Condon's house was, like most of the middle-class stations of the time, built of stone, cottage fashion, with verandahs front and back, and the servants' quarters and kitchen outside. A compact little house it was, with a drawing-room and dining-room on each side of the lobby in front on the ground floor, and the parlour and office opposite each other to the back ; above were the bedrooms and bathroom ; the stables, which covered a considerable space of ground, lay outside the kitchen, in a separate yard.

My horse, although struck, carried me up to the front door safely ; he was not wounded in any vital part, but had lost some blood, and went stiffly over to his stables. Rainbow had to be assisted from his steed, but was able to limp inside without assistance. He had plugged the bullet hole with his crape mask, and bound it tightly round with his handkerchief. Under the hands of Jessie, and a stiff glass of brandy, he declared himself presently ready for action.

The sundowner was a pitiful object when he heard that he was expected to do his share of the fighting. He had never handled a gun in his life, and appealed to Mr Condon and the ladies, in the name and memory of his peace-preaching father, to spare his sensitive spirit from the proximity of blood and danger.

"Put me into the attics or the cellar," he cried, "or I shall faint at the first fire, and be no use, only a hindrance to you. I may look big and strong, but I am soft and tender-hearted, and the thought of fighting turns me sick."

"I'll back you up," observed Rainbow tranquilly. "I'll be behind you the whole time there. You'll occupy the same window as I do, and I'll see after you that you don't faint, my man."

There was no affectation about the sundowner now, he was truly the most unhappy of men, but at the sight of that remorseless revolver he had to shake himself up and obey orders.

The two servants, under Jessie, were packed where the sundowner wanted to go, into the cellar, and locked in ; but

Jessie and Sabina insisted on staying with us. Jessie, of course, being bred up to danger, was as ready for the battle as any of the men; Sabina, without wanting to fight, still thought she could be useful loading the weapons, so after a struggle we allowed her to stay in also.

We did not take long over our preparations. While Mr Condon got out all the defensive weapons which were about the place, and the men were loading their own, we went round the house, shut the outer venetians and locked the French doors, leaving only the dining-room open, where Sabina and her father agreed to sit and wait the coming of that decoy duck Sandy Macintosh. Until he got inside we were all to keep back, and then secure him. We did not expect to have much trouble with the traitor once the outer door was shut upon him. After that we would wait upon the midnight coming of the gang, and trap them one by one as they entered.

It was a good programme, carefully considered upon all points, and, only for one small item which we overlooked entirely, might easily have been completely successful.

That very small item was the fox terrier Gyp, whom I had quite forgotten was an old acquaintance of the unsuspecting traitor, and who completely altered the coming performance.

We had been at our posts for a little over half an hour—Sabina and her father in the lighted dining-room, with Bernard and Gyp beside them, while we stood in the drawing room, in the dark, and with the door slightly ajar, when his arrogant double knock sounded on the outer panel.

We had arranged that Sabina was to go to the door, and, opening it, recognise him and ask him in.

She went to the door, and along with her the fussy Gyp, barking shrilly at the late intruder.

The first part went off all right. As he mentioned his name, and bared his head to the moonlight, she recognised him, and with true bush hospitality invited him to enter.

But Gyp also had recognised him, and not in a friendly way, for he rushed at his legs with gleaming teeth, at which Sandy drew back and in his turn recognised Gyp, and, vulgarly speaking, "smelt a rat," for with a loud curse and a savage kick at his small enemy he retreated rapidly from the verandah.

In a moment we were after him to the moonlit lawn, in a body, but as we did not consider it safe to follow him further than the edge of the orchard we paused there, at least all with the exception of one pursuer, the unlucky digger.

He had seized the golden moment, and still continued his chase for a few steps further, when crack went the revolver of Macintosh, on whom he was gaining, and with an uncertain half rest and stagger backwards the Father of Sundowners fell face downwards upon the grass he loved so well to bask amongst.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE ATTACK ON THE STATION.

YES, that awful rascal Gyp had upset all our plans, warned our enemies, and ended the mortal pilgrimage of the weary sundowner.

He was running away certainly, and, contrary to his usual habits, remarkably active. But he received the bullet in his chest, the same as if he had been bravely facing the enemy, and looked almost as interesting as if he had been a mortally wounded hero, as we lifted him up and carried him quickly back to the drawing-room, where we laid him down upon the carpet to be examined by Mr Condon, while we saw to the shutting of the doors and front window blinds.

The sundowner had got his quietus, and orders to tramp on to another country. He lived for a quarter of an hour after we had carried him inside, and spent the time left him trying to bamboozle the company with a detached series of inventions. The bullet had passed through his left lung, and settled in his vertebra, so that, although he could not speak or breath easily, he suffered no pain, which is one advantage of getting one's back broken, if perhaps the only advantage.

"I—was a surveyor—last job—but—didn't get on somehow—I—expect—it was—because I was—too in—dust—rious—when a man—does—too—much—for his money—he— isn't —thought—anything—of—I always did—too much.

"Yes, friends, I've always been—unfortunate—lost my father—and mother—early—in life, and—was—left—alone to—struggle—for—bread—hard work it was—after that—

I foolishly got married—owing entirely to—my tender heart, and—lost both wife—and children—through influenza.

“I’m a—lonely wanderer—and I’ve travelled a—lot, and yet—there seems—no chance—of me—settling—down—I’ve—got—to—go—further—and—perhaps—fare—worse—still—it’s—my—duty to—go—on—and—so—I’m—going on.”

His lying tongue stopped at this last word, which perhaps was not altogether so false as the former portions of his slowly delivered speech, then he laid his head gently backwards, as he had been so often used to do of an afternoon, and “went on.”

“First blood,” murmured Rainbow, as he crossed over to the lamp and blew it out, and then placed himself at one of the windows, with his rifle ready.

The three stockmen were watching at the back windows, while Mr Condon, Sabina, and Jessie had gone into the drawing-room. Rainbow took the one window and I took the other. Dicky had disappeared, but then he was always independent in his modes of action. Possibly he was somewhere upstairs.

“Leave Dicky alone; there is something he means to find out just now. I saw him slip away amongst the trees when that fellow was shot. When he has discovered what he wants he’ll drop in upon us, from down the chimney or some unexpected place, and tell us; and I think I know what Dicky is after.”

Rainbow spoke in a dogged way very unlike his usual, so I looked at him, and saw by the faint moonlight which stole in that he was resting his knee upon a chair.

“Does your leg hurt much, old chap?”

“We’ll think of that presently—here the beggars come. I thought Dan would soon tire of the skulking game.”

The intimation of the presence of the enemy was made by a volley from the orchard, which rattled against the walls and made clean holes in the venetian blinds, while the glass splintered and fell about our heads.

But they did not show themselves much. They merely sent that first volley to aggravate us into firing back, so that they might be able to count our rifles, and by that judge of our fighting force, to see which game would serve them best—the waiting or the bold rush.

However, we were wary, and reserved our shot, seeing that there was nothing visible to fire upon. Presently, however, Mr Condon and Jessie must have seen an object from the drawing-room, for a single report came from there, followed by a sudden yell from behind one of the trees and the leap forward of a figure into the moonlight, with upraised arms before he fell.

"Second blood," muttered Rainbow, "and that makes the third."

As he spoke he fired at a figure which at the moment had been foolish enough to change his tree. It also fell backwards between the trees.

"That's Jack Casey gone under. I thought often that he wouldn't last long," observed Rainbow, as he put in a fresh cartridge and looked out keenly.

"Hallo! there's a fellow trying to creep along the branches like a bandicot. Let me have a shy at him."

Another yell as the rifle cracked, and the bushranger dropped to the ground and lay there.

"That's Thomas Hunt, another black sheep of my flock, who was always trying to persuade us that he was something. How much longer is Dolan going to stand this weeding out of his vegetables?"

Not long, for as we still watched another volley came belching out of the trees, and then, as the smoke rolled away, we saw them in the lawn, rushing as fast as they could towards us.

"It's revolver practice now, old man; kick open your window and let's meet them on the verandah."

As Rainbow spoke he tore off his false beard, and flinging back the blind, leapt out upon the verandah in his proper character. Jessie also had done the same from her window, or French door rather, and was now leaning over the railing, popping as hard as she could at the advancing figures, who, led on by the gigantic ruffian Dan Dolan, were now within six feet of us.

"Halt!"

It was Rainbow's voice, and as he uttered the command he pitched down his hat and stood revealed to his former men.

"The captain, by thunder!" cried Dolan, falling back a step or two in his astonishment. "We thought you was hundreds of miles from this colony."

"You see I am here. Now, what do you want on my preserves—eh?"

The bushrangers had halted with their leader, and now gathered beside him, while Rainbow stood resting on his rifle, his smoking revolver still in his hand. One of the fellows had fallen on the grass, but there were still six left unwounded. Sandy Mackintosh was not present.

Jessie, now that truce had been declared, had left the verandah railings, and stood leaning against the dining-room window, full in the moonlight, and between myself and her lover, reloading her revolver and waiting on the next event.

"Now, see yer, Captain Rainbow, neither of us knew yer was on this ground, or we mightn't have fired on it. But now that we are here, there's two things to consider—first, you've chucked up your situation of your own accord, and I have been chosen captain in your place; second, you've been a-shooting away at my men as if we was your natural enemies, and that, as you know, has got to be paid for according to our rules. Of course you may have the excuse handy that you didn't know us in the dark. Is that so, captain?"

Gigantic Dan Dolan paused for a reply, and Rainbow looked down on the ground, pondering. All at once we raised our heads and listened. Horses at the gallop and coming on regularly.

"By the Lord, there's mounted troopers posting this road. We'll get your answer some other night, captain. Boys, vamush!" cried the startled Dan Dolan.

In a second Dolan and his gang were scudding as hard as they could for the shelter of the bush, while in front of us raced Dicky as fast as he could cover the grass.

"Master—the troopers, and after you—" He gasped as he came to the verandah edge, and hung on to recover his breath.

At this moment I felt a bullet whistle past me, and a sudden cry from Jessie, who was still standing behind; but as I looked back she was still standing in the same position, with a forced smile on her lips, and her rifle at the aim against her shoulder.

"That's the last of that skunk, Macintosh," cried Rainbow as he lowered his rifle, while Jessie dropped her weapon on the ground with a heavy clang. She was holding both hands now to her side, but still smiling. "I just got him after he had fired that shot."

"No, Jim, I potted him," cried Jessie huskily, as she stuck her back stiffly against the window frame.

"Good God, Jessie, have you been hit?" cried Rainbow, as he sprang towards her all unheeding the approaching troopers, whose thumping fell now distinctly on the ears.

"No, Jim, my love, not hit. The dingo *almost* missed me, but it was my rifle which potted him, you know, not yours. Clear out, my darling, for here come the troopers. Out by the back. I am not hurt—only a bit of a rough shake—only a bone of my stays broken—that's all. Kiss me quick and clear."

I saw her put one arm up to his neck, while the other still clutched at her side, and kiss him savagely, then she pushed him from her roughly, with the strange shrill cry, "For the love of God, Jim, clear!"

At the same time Dicky, who had scrambled up the verandah, clutched his arms, and with both hands drew him into the dining-room and along the lobby, towards the back, where the stables were.

One swift glance towards the orchard, along which the troopers were rushing, and I had only time to catch Jessie, as she swayed from the window, carry her into the drawing-room, where Mr Condon was, place her in his arms, snatch a kiss from the ice-cold lips of Sabina, and follow the pair to the stables.

Prince and another horse were out and saddled as I ran up.

"Where's mine, Jim?"

"You don't need to join me in this chase, Luck."

"Don't I?"

In a moment I had out a horse, and was on his bare back, with the bridle in my hands. I could put that on afterwards, meantime I must trust to chance, for the troopers were now swarming round the house from both sides.

We paused no longer, but with a "Shoo, boys!" we were over the yard fence and away.

"Where to, Graham?"

"That way, Luck. Follow me, if you will come further on my road."

He pointed towards the north.

We had a good five minutes' start of the men, for the stables were divided from the house by a tall clematis covered trellis partition, and when we got over the fence we al-

most instantly plunged into a plantation, so that not being seen or heard, owing to the soft grass, the troopers imagined we were still in the house hiding, and only thought about surrounding that.

Indeed, I had time to change horses with Dicky, as mine was the lightest of the three and he had been used to bare-back riding—time to do this, and put the bridle on him for Dicky, when we were off again.

"Luck, tell me one thing, do you think Jessie was hurt, for if so I'd ride straight back and give myself up. You saw her last, how was she?"

"The same as when you left her. The stay-bone was a trifle painful, I daresay; they mostly are when they go snap suddenly, I have heard."

"If that's all, I don't mind," replied Rainbow, with a sigh. "I'm leaving her, Luck, old boy; when shall we meet next?"

Could I tell him that she was dead when I left her in the arms of Mr Condon, and that only the supernatural powers of a woman's love had supported her against that window frame? Could I tell him that the back of his neck was stained with the life-blood she had been keeping in until she had seen him clear, and so take the heart out of him when he needed it most, when my own heart felt bursting with grief for the girl who had been so kind to me during those Melbourne weeks, the brave wench who had staved back death so that he might not know it, and concentrated weeks of torture into that one moment of smiling farewell, and with the superhuman effort which only a loving woman and a high-bred horse could make, had held up to the last instant with the semblance of strength?

It wasn't in me to betray that dying effort, that noble smile—not although fifty lies had to be told to guard that sublime secret from *him* for the present.

I glanced aside to Dicky, who was riding alongside of me, with Prince and his master in front, and fancied that the boy's inscrutable eyes looked at me more kindly than usual, and that they afterwards rested on the dark stain on the back of Graham's neck and shirt. Had he penetrated to the effort, as I had seen the result? A strange and weird boy was that silent Dicky.

I think the troopers stationed in front must have caught sight of us as we rounded the brow of the first hill, for

as we turned to take our last look of Fernwood we saw a sudden movement take place, and a rush towards the road of about a dozen of them. Fortunately our horses were fresh, and Graham's very best selection, which had not been ridden except for exercise for the past month, and therefore were in first-class condition, while those the troopers rode were blown with their long ride from Wood's Point, so that for the time we had no necessity to put them to their full speed; that would come when they got fresh horses, as they would shortly.

"How did you know that they were after us, Dicky?" I asked as we rode along, for Rainbow was still in front, with his head down, and without speaking. I think his wounded leg was smarting considerably.

"I followed the inspector after he left you this morning, and I saw him go to the telegraph office and send off a long message, and then I thought that he was describing you both. He waited for the answer, but it did not come until afternoon, for I saw him go down again and send off another. And again, when I was coming for you to the hall, he sent off another, and was waiting for the answer when we passed the office on our way here."

"But how did you know that he was wiring about us?"

"I did not know, but I thought. If it is about us, the troopers will be along to-night, so I ran to the edge of the bush as soon as I saw you in, and getting up to the top of the highest tree, I watched until I saw them coming, and then I knew it was all up."

"Wonderful boy," I thought. "With a brain like a Lecocq, and the single heart of a dog."

For eight hours we rode on, not at our fastest, but taking long swinging leaps when the ground was level, and walking up the hills and down again. We had no settled place as yet; we were merely keeping to the road and heading towards the mountains, hoping to tire them out, and intending as soon as daylight came to get off the bridle track. At the present we were safest to keep to that, the country being strange to us.

About dawn we came to the top of a ridge where we could see the country for miles behind us, and here we made up our minds to dismount and give our horses a rest. There was nothing like a habitation within sight, but all wild, lonely, and majestic.

Down in the valley we could see a stream running along, but we were safer on the ridge ; so we sat down and filled our pipes, having nothing else about us.

"How is your revolver, Luck—loaded?" asked Rainbow abruptly, after a gloomy pause.

I looked at the weapon, which I had stuck into my belt ; it was empty, and I hadn't a cartridge with me.

"Empty, I see ; so is mine—all except one shot, and that I shall have to keep to the last. Chuck the thing away ; it's only so much dead weight."

I took his advice, and sent the useless article over the cliff face. After this we sat smoking and thinking.

"There is no use leaving the bridle track in these regions, Luck, for ten chances to one we may get into a *cul de sac*, or be stopped by a precipice or unpassable river. We must just keep on until we weary them out."

Dicky here approached and said,—

"Six troopers in sight."

CHAPTER XL.

THE LAST RIDE.

WE crept to the edge of the ridge and looked over. Yes, Dicky was right. There were six troopers coming over the plains, with horses which looked fresh enough, for they bounded along without any urging. They were still about four miles from the ridge foot, which was a steep one to climb, while before us the bridle path zigzagged down towards that stream, and along the valley by its banks as long as the path was there. We knew that there would be a way out, for it had been traversed before. So, taking our bridles in our hands, we led our horses down towards the stream.

A tedious downward path that was, which we couldn't hurry over, because a slip would be fatal. We had our horses to think about, even more than ourselves, to keep them right.

Zigzagging amongst small boulders and stones, with only dead trees starting up or lying down in rows, and never a place which could cover even Dicky, far less us, if we had wanted a cover, it was a desolate, dead region as far as vegetation was concerned, and open for miles along that

arid valley to the sight of those who might stand on the ridge which we had left.

And the bright sun of another day was rising, although we could not see it as yet from our position half-way down the hill. They would see it, though, who were following us when they reached that mountain top, and see us also as it beamed upon us by the time we had reached that silver river.

Down, step by step, picking our way cautiously amongst that shifting *debris*, with our hearts throbbing with impatience and our nerves strained to curb it, lest by a sudden jerk at the reins we should cause our horses to stumble and sprain those precious high-bred ankles upon which our liberty depended. It was like the trying to run away from a nightmare ghost.

As we went we cast our glances backward to that hill-top, where we expected the troopers each moment to appear.

At last we have reached the level, and once more mount our horses, and as we do so a loud shout floats down to us, the air is so thin here, announcing that our pursuers have caught sight of us.

We still look back as we ride. They have not taken the trouble we did to dismount; only one trooper does so, but his beast is a splendid one. The others ride helter skelter down the hill, regardless of their own necks or their horses' heels, the consequence being that three out of the six are disabled, and after sending flying shots after us, relinquish the chase, leaving it to the two lucky ones to take up, and that cautious trooper who is still a considerable distance from the bottom and who is not hurrying himself.

The two troopers dig their spurs into their horses and dash on as soon as they reach level ground, leaving the cautious one with the disabled ones far behind.

It was a long and winding path, but at last we reached the fording place, and wading over, we began the next ascent, still a bare hill-side, with only rough stones and dead trees about. When we commenced that climb up the troopers were not in sight, but before we were half-way up we saw them round the turn of the valley, and shortly afterwards the careful trooper also who had walked his horse down the hill.

I don't know how it was, but that last man haunted me more than the other two; he looked so like a jockey holding

in his horse for the last spurt, while the others were merely expending their strength at the beginning.

Our horses pulled us up nobly, but it was a long and a tiresome hill, and like the last, bare and shelterless. By the time we neared the top they were down at the ford.

Ping—ping—ping!

I knew what these sounds were, but I had felt the burning touch on my shoulder before the echo s reached my ears, seen also Dicky, who was above me, sink forward on his horse's neck, like as a wearied child sinks forward on his face to sleep, and the horse itself make a frantic rush upwards to the flat top, and there drop, with a snort and a piteous sigh, depositing his light burden on the other side of him.

I was still wondering if I had been really struck, when I saw Rainbow fling himself from his horse and lift the prostrate Dicky in his arms. We were now out of sight of those coming up by this time.

Dicky opened his coal-black eyes at the touch of his friend, and, while a spasm of pain crossed his smooth face, he said,—

"She smiled and let you go, so can I. Clear, master, clear, and leave me, for my goose is cooked."

Dicky's horse was dead, and so was Dicky. But the smile which he had conjured up remained behind on his small white face, and the loving look in his glazing eyes. With a hoarse cry, more like the roar of a wild beast than of a human being, Rainbow caught up the little body in his arms, and again mounting his horse, Prince rode down the mountain side like one possessed.

I followed dreamily, leaving my horse to go as he pleased, for the pain at my shoulder had now left, and only the arm which was next to it felt numb and cold. No other sensation touched me, not even curiosity about those coming behind, or much interest about the two who were in front of me—the dead boy, and his silent, galloping master.

Down into another valley and along it until we burst into a level plain, over which we also coursed, still with the same pleasant sensation about my heart of floating on summer clouds.

So on we rode for many hours with that solitary, dogged, Fate-like trooper behind us, for the other two impetuous ones had long since broken down. On, with that seemingly

limitless and treeless plain in front, Prince still taking the lead, and that patient trooper about a mile in our rear.

I saw the sun rise overhead and burn down the night-fed grass, but without warming my cold right arm; in fact its intense heat could not reach me at all now, for I felt cool all over. Then the sun went slowly down, glowing and golden, with the evening clouds clustering round it, and taking on strange purple and crimson shapes.

In front of us spread a large waterhole, all a glister of molten gold, for we were now riding due west, and the setting sun was shining full upon that large sheet of water.

As we neared it I saw Rainbow turn about in his saddle and take his first look at the trooper, then his bloodshot eyes fell upon me, while he muttered something, but what it was I couldn't quite gather, for everything around me seemed floating in a delicious rosy mist, and in my ears sounded murmurings like those heard on telegraph wires when a message is flashing along. A most delicious sensation it was, now that I recall it again.

We had just reached the pool when my horse stumbled suddenly, or rather sank exhausted upon the ground, and threw me gently a little way from him.

I wasn't hurt in the slightest, but I could no more rise than I could have flown; and when Rainbow saw my predicament he reined in the matchless Prince, still unblown, and waited quietly on the trooper who was coming along so steadily.

I saw the revolver, with its single charge, raised and cover the advancing policeman, who, however, never paused until he was about six yards distant, when he also drew rein, and in a clear voice shouted,—

"Cave in, Captain Rainbow, for your time is up."

Then I heard Graham say huskily,—

"You are a bold man, trooper, to face a desperate one like me. Are you a sergeant?"

"No, not yet."

"A married man?"

"Yes."

"Any children?"

"Three, and another expected," replied the trooper coolly.

"And your name?"

"William Thompson."

"Well, I have never killed a man yet, W. T., and I don't like to begin with you, but I made a vow long ago never to be taken alive, and the reward for me is either dead or alive, isn't it?"

"Yes; but I'd rather take you alive than kill you as you now are. I have the same objections as you have to that sort of thing."

"Is your revolver loaded?"

"Yes."

"Then will you make a fair fight of it, with my friend here as witness?"

"I don't object, if there is no other way out," answered the policeman quietly.

"Will you delay our little mill until to-morrow morning?" asked Graham.

"Why?"

"Because I have a duty to do to-night. I want to bury this little boy, and doctor my chum here, he is wounded."

"You won't dodge me, will you, Rainbow?"

"Do I look like a man of that sort?" asked Rainbow, with the old flash in his wearied eyes.

"No; there, I give you my word as a gentleman to chum with you till to-morrow morning," answered the trooper.

"Right you are," I heard Rainbow reply, and then the glittering scene faded from me.

When I came once more to my senses I found my shoulder doctored, and Graham sitting alongside of the policeman, both smoking together and speaking like good friends.

They had lit a fire with some small dead wood which lay beside the waterhole, and were waiting upon me to wake up and begin supper, the provider of which was the trooper, and as he had a flask with him, besides his supply of damper and cold meat, we did not do so badly after our long fast.

After supper the trooper helped Graham to dig a grave for little Dicky, whom they had meantime laid beside me. They had only their sheaf-knives to dig it with, therefore it took some time; but the soil round the pool was soft, so that helped them greatly, and they finished the task before midnight.

Rainbow had only his shirt to wrap the body in, but he took that off, and after this duty was over he lay down alongside of Dicky without any upper covering. Poor

Dicky ! there had never been much demonstration of affection between the two, but they understood each other for all that. I felt out of it at such a parting.

Graham went about it passively enough, and when it was over came and sat beside me for a little before he lay down, steady looking.

"You feel some better now, Luck, don't you, old chap?" he said kindly.

"I don't fancy I ever felt very bad, Graham."

"It isn't a very serious wound, Luck, but you have lost a good deal of blood. Did you know when you left Fernwood that Jessie was dead?"

He fixed his grey eyes on me calmly, but kindly enough, and I dropped mine guiltily.

"It does not matter now, old fellow ; my friend Thompson here told me all about it. You know what we are going to do to-morrow morning?"

"Yes, old man," I replied gently.

"You will give us the signal ; however, we'll arrange about it when we wake up. Good-night."

I fancy that he slept soundly enough that night, at least he lay quietly alongside of me and Dicky until I fell asleep. In the morning when I woke up I saw Graham, with the policeman's pencil, writing on the fly-leaf of a little book.

"This is the present that I promised you, old fellow long ago—my fatal volume of poems. I have made Sabina my heir to the *little trifles* I left with Mr Condon, and I want you also to look after Prince for me, that is if my friend W. T. will kindly wink at the transfer."

He glanced towards Thompson, who nodded silently and looked away at the rising sun.

"Now I think my earthly affairs are about arranged. There's the precious book, old man, which made me turn a bushranger ; take it, and read it at your leisure if you can."

Men don't say much at a moment like this to each other. I was still too weak to rise up. I could only clasp his hand in silence, and look into his warm grey eyes ; then he sprang to his feet, with a little dry laugh.

"Now, Trooper Thompson, for my liberty, or your promotion. Are you ready?"

"Yes !" replied the trooper, getting up and laying down his pipe.

"You understand the conditions—until one of us is killed."

"Yes!"

"There's my wiper, Luck; count three out as loudly as you can, and then drop it."

They shook hands together, and then backed until there was about ten feet between them and steadily took aim.

"One! Two!! Three!!!"

Then I dropped the crimson silk handkerchief, still looking at my friend and hoping that he would escape, even at the expense of this manly trooper.

I heard only one report, but they must have both fired, for I saw the blue smoke curl out of Graham's pistol while he stood for a moment with his head turned up, watching something in the sky, with a rapt expression on his clean-shaven features, while from his naked white breast spurted out a tiny rivulet of blood that began to trickle down his ribs. Then he swung abruptly half round towards me, and slid easily to the ground upon his right side.

.

It is three years and a half since that strange duel, but Trooper Thompson kept his promise, so that Prince is still with us, the pet of our stable.

I was taken down to Melbourne along with my dead friend, and, while our captor received his promotion and five hundred pounds, I got three weeks' imprisonment for "complicity." I think that was what they called it. It wasn't very much, and soon passed over in the gaol hospital. Then I went back, cured of my shoulder wound, to Fernwood.

Sabina and I have been married for two years now, and are still, we may say, upon our wedding tour. We've been all over the world in most of the P. & O. steamships, and, in fact, I am almost ashamed to say that our baby was born in Hong Kong, and is therefore, like Dicky, half a Chinaman. We have christened him James Richard Graham Mortimer.

We have been in England and at Mortimer Hall for the last three months, for it is our own now. Mr Sampson's message caught us at Suez, as we were on our way home to dear Victoria, and brought us back to stepmother England to take possession of a property which, except for old associations, I really did not want or need. Miserly old money-lending Mortimer, after leading a life of penury and commercial infamy as Moses & Co., passed in his checks quite

unexpectedly, without leaving a will of any kind, so that my uncle's property and his own compound accumulation came back quite naturally to me, the oldest representative of the ancient Mortimers, so that I may say young J. R. G. Mortimer is considered about the district as rather a fortunate boy.

Mr Sampson still manages our business, and I hope may long continue to do so, although I am afraid that you will think me vindictive when I tell you that I got rid of our rector; but he was such a time-server, and truckled to me so servilely on my restoration that he quite revolted the free and independent Victorian spirit of Sabina, so that she would not sit under him at any price. Therefore the living is at present vacant and open to applicants in holy orders. Sabina wants someone with the backbone of a man, who will not truckle to his patron, or domineer over his poor sheep, but as yet none have come forward who have quite pleased that critical young matron, and I am leaving the matter entirely in her hands, my own personal experience of the spiritual shepherds not being such as to warrant my interference.

Jim Wood, of course, is with us. He married Bessie Watson, and brought her home to the Hall; Elsie Kemp returned with us also, and is now our under housekeeper. Shocking, isn't it?

Solemn Bernard and the disreputable Gyp are also with us, while Jenkins has been on a visit to us for the past two months, so that "we are all in it," as the lion comique might sing.

We have never been able, although Mr Sampson has tried every method, to discover anything more about Otto Schopenhauer, therefore I rather fancy this was only an assumed name. His share of the gold find is still held in trust. Graham had bequeathed his share, on that fly-leaf, to Sabina, so that I needed the Hall after all to be on a level with her. Ovinus Hardwake was duly hanged, but died without leaving a confession.

Grandfather Condon came over the herring pond to see us last week, and brought with him a bundle of *Australasians*, *Ages*, *Sketchers*, and *Arguses*. They are coming up in Victoria in the shape of literature in spite of the loss of *The Financial Diver*.

But the item of news most interesting to me is the account of a marriage in high life.

"The Hon. Stringy Bark, M.P., to Lady Victoria Champney, spinster."

This announcement was set up in pica, thick leaded, and divided into short pars, so that I suppose he had a finger in the getting of it up.

My father-in-law was at the wedding, and says the papers are quite right to call this scion of an ancient line a spinster. She is that beyond the slightest doubt, and extremely ancient.

Thus this literary larikin, with his constant habit of ever looking upward, has achieved the sum total of his desires, for he can rise no higher in the colonies, and as he has been blessed beyond his deserts, so also have I.

THE END.

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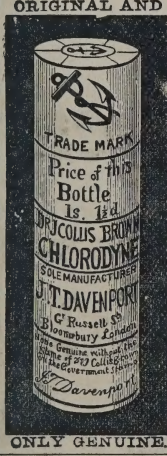
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